
This is a reproduction of a library book that was digitized by Google as part of an ongoing effort to preserve the information in books and make it universally accessible.

GoogleTM books

<https://books.google.com>



A

923,733





GREEN SANDALS

GREEN SANDALS

BY

CECIL CHAMPAIN LOWIS

Author of The Runagate, The Grass Spinner, &c.



LONDON

JONATHAN CAPE LTD

FIRST PUBLISHED IN MCMXXVI
MADE & PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY BUTLER & TANNER LTD
FROME AND
LONDON

828
L9204gr



1294772-234

CONTENTS

- I HONORIA PROLOGIZES
- II STAYNES CARRIES ON
- III VENNE CLEANS UP

I. HONORIA PROLOGIZES

CHAPTER I

PEOPLE tell me when I frown and profess not to be able to remember names and faces and the like that I must be suffering from what they call 'Burma head.'

Perhaps I am; and it's rather a miserable admission to have to make when one has set about reviewing the past, but let me say at once that, though the climate has played tricks with my memory; it is only recent events that are clouded. Old times come back to me as fresh as ever. In any case I can't blame 'Burma head' for the fact that I find it very difficult now to recapture any abiding picture of my first youthful impressions of Mingin.

And the reason for this difficulty is that in nearly all externals that queer little seaport, strung out along the hot tropical foreshore, where gulf and river mingle in a greenish tide, was too much like the half-dozen other Burma stations in which I had already lived as a girl. There were the same snuff-brown European bungalows perched on their teak piles in the shade of dark-leaved mango trees; the same ill-fenced compounds, unpardonably choked with bamboo and *hibiscus*; the same whitewashed pagodas basking, neglected, amid dry jungle growth; the same steamy corrugated-iron bazaar, ablaze with silks of pink and orange and emerald, and reeking with the sickly smell of calico and *durians* and fish-paste; the same brick-red laterite roads stretching out towards flat paddy fields through straggling hamlets where thatched Burman hovels peered out

GREEN SANDALS

from among the green of plantain clumps and lanky coco-nut palms threw absurdly short shadows, and the screech and the dust of the country bullock-cart rose up into a sky of brass. I had seen all this sort of thing many times before. The black-timbered wharf at Mingin and the small ocean-going steamers and the saltish breeze blowing in over the distant mangrove flats were, it is true, something that the previous inland stations hadn't been able to offer, but the difference that these features made had lost their novelty long before the place had ceased to be merely the last of a uniform succession of temporary homes that I was bound to quit in a few weeks' time.

For exactly the same reason I couldn't now give you my earliest recollections of the white residents of the station. It was not as though I let things go past me — sixteen is nothing if not an impressionable age! — but the Europeans of Mingin, official and non-official, conformed to a type already so familiar that not a soul among them could strike a really arresting note. I am sure if any person was out of the ordinary run of human beings it was the man who was destined later to be my husband, and yet I can't remember meeting him for the first time, and his loose-limbed figure was an accustomed landmark in my surroundings long before I had any idea that he was going to be more to me than any other of the twoscore men with *topis* as white as their faces whom I saw driving to or from office in their high dog-carts or sitting round little marble-topped tables near the bar of the shabby red-shingled Mingin club.

GREEN SANDALS

My father and I were two whole years in Mingin – an exceptionally long stay for us – but it wasn't till a week or so before we left again that Oswald Brendish and I exchanged more than the barest station civilities. I had known him all those two years as a rather unsociable bachelor who took long solitary walks in the warm dusk and played a good game of chess. He was in one of the smaller business houses, fairly well off, a high shy ungainly man whom, for all his self-effacement, it was impossible wholly to overlook. He towered and twitched; his pasty seamed face always seemed to be getting in the way of the punkah. But beyond towering and twitching he did nothing to attract attention. He got little joy from his fellows. It was impossible to imagine him in love. He used to give me the impression of being so overstrung that all the subtler emotions were bound to be shaken out of their course by the jerkings of his anatomy long before they could reach his brain. He was so fidgety and at the same time so ineffectual that, like a little fool, I took a childish pride, after the event, in the fact that I had been able to lift the long creature for one brief moment, at any rate, on to the plane of deep feeling and resolute action.

My father, who was in the Public Works Department, had just been granted six months' leave. He and I were to start for England in a fortnight. I had been through two Mingin hot weathers and, with the beginnings of a third to face, was literally sickening for the feel of a soft English April. And it was precisely at this inauspicious moment that

GREEN SANDALS

this strange awkward man chose to take his courage in both hands and become all at once unique and unforgettable.

It was a fiery morning in March when the joyful news came through that my father's leave had been granted.

I was in the club that same evening. The punkahs were barely flapping overhead and I felt more than ordinarily hot and sticky. Our little squeaky Volunteer band had just finished panting out 'God save the King' on the rickety bandstand in the breathless darkened compound, and were packing up their instruments to go. With the stoppage of the music outside, the clinking of glasses and murmur of talk in the inner rooms had re-asserted themselves. I laid down the illustrated paper — full of tantalizing European snow scenes — over which I had been poring, to find that I was alone in the reading-room, or rather not quite alone, for Mr. Brendish was standing there, holding back the *purdah* hanging over the door that led out into the verandah, and staring hard over my head.

How long he had been there I cannot say. For all I knew it might have been half an hour. As I looked up he came over towards me, jerkily, as was his wont, knocking against the chairs and tables as he stepped, with his hands clenched; rubbing the backs of his fingers with his thumbs in a way that later became a hopeless trick with him and, almost before I realized that I was actually his objective, he was asking me — still gazing over my head — whether he might see me home.

GREEN SANDALS

I was glad enough of the escort for, as it happened, the syce was not coming that night with the usual hand-lantern to fetch me, and I had a wholesome dread of snakes, but I demurred a little, not wishing to take him out of his way, and might have gone on demurring if Mr. Brendish had not clinched the matter by declaring earnestly, as he pulled at his lower lip, that he wanted to have a talk with me.

A talk with me! Of course, like any other child of my age, I immediately pounced on one particular subject of all the many subjects that man and maid talk about, and I remember thinking it most unfair of him to spring a thing like *that* on me just when I was leaving Mingin for good and all.

Of course, next moment, in spite of the way his eyes followed me about and his breath came and went, I dismissed as preposterous the idea of its being *that* in *his* case. . . . He was positively the very last person!

And of course, five minutes later, while we were plodding along the dusty road, with his servant swinging a hand-lantern in front of us – blissfully unaware of the urgency of the suit that was being pressed in broken murmurs behind his back – I discovered that it was indeed about that very thing that poor Mr. Brendish had wanted to talk.

I was to learn that the hope he was cherishing was no new one. 'I've been yearning for this evening for the last six months!' he said – just as though I were bound to accept him! – and it struck me at the time as very pitiful that it was almost exactly six

GREEN SANDALS

months since I, in my turn, had been yearning for this same evening – the evening when I could at last pat myself on the back and say, 'Honorias, my good woman, you'll be home in time for the primroses!' To tell the truth I almost resented being snatched away from my spring day-dreams to no more useful end than to listen to his tale of woe. The night was sweltering and, as I have said, I had been feeling hot and sticky, but I was as cold as ice now as I stepped by his side, far too preoccupied to think about snakes, watching the shadows slanting on the road, with my eye roving anxiously ahead for a glimpse of our white compound gate which I knew would afford me an escape from his protestations.

I was a little beast! . . . Never once, by word or look, did I try to help him out in his wretched stammerings. This much I can say for myself, however. When once he had said his say and put his case I did make my own point of view quickly and mercifully clear. I didn't leave him a loophole.

He saw me duly to my white gate of refuge and left me just on the farther side of it with a very wrung face on him which looked, I remember, very shiny in the lantern flare.

And then, when the sound of his footsteps had died away on the stifling air and I was free to creep back, if I so wished it, to my primrose imaginings, I began to feel horribly sorry for the routed one.

Only sorry – nothing more. And yet, if he had turned him about in his despondent going and come back to me while I still stood in the gloom by the white gate – and I stood there quite a time – I

GREEN SANDALS

believe I should have told him I hadn't meant all I said.

What had I said?

It's 'Burma head,' perhaps, but I can hardly remember now. Something about loathing the country like poison; a good deal about longing to get back to England; a little about my mother's recent death and my father's need of me; the usual thing about being very young — oh, I harped on that! Not a word that I can recall about my own feelings for the man who was stalking with humped shoulders at my side. He had given me no cause for any feeling but pity, and pity alone couldn't strike the divine flame out of the little flinty heart that I could feel beating somewhere within my chilled body.

No; pity alone was not enough to work the wonder. And yet, as I have told you, if he had reappeared three minutes later out of the warm darkness, I should probably have discovered something to say to him that might have lifted the hump from his shoulders.

But then, you see, he didn't come.

I did not meet him again for eighteen months. My father got an extension of leave and at the end of it was posted to Rangoon. I never expected to see Oswald Brendish there, but see him I did, by the purest accident, at the Gymkhana Club, soon after my arrival. It was near the end of the rains. The frogs, far off in the cantonment ditches, were booming out a dreary accompaniment to the blare

GREEN SANDALS

of the Native Infantry band. The air was close and clammy and Oswald looked very pale and washed out as he paced, bare-headed, in his ill-fitting clothes, up and down over the damp grass at my side. It was as though he had spent the whole of his absence from me exposed to the merciless buffetings of the monsoon, and again I felt pity quicken within me. I couldn't help thinking that if I had been able to hold up one little atom of hope for him at our last meeting his face wouldn't have looked quite as haggard as it did. I felt then as I had once felt as a child when I stupidly left a new doll all night out in the rain in the garden. The loss of the doll had been a minor consideration (the creature's hair hadn't been the right colour and she couldn't open and shut her eyes), but to forget all about her like that had seemed so ungrateful to the kind donor. And now here was something that Oswald had offered me, left out, so to speak, all night in the rain again. . . . It troubled me not a little!

He was only on a few days' visit to Rangoon and went back to Mingin without breathing a word about what had happened on that former occasion. I hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry at his reticence, but on the whole I was relieved, for he had been terribly on my mind. 'He has got over it, poor man,' I assured myself, and was really and truly a little surprised when, three months later, he proposed a second time – this time in writing – from Mingin. It was a most heartrending letter, recalling everything, asking me if I couldn't change my mind.

I did change my mind. It wasn't as though he

GREEN SANDALS

had asked me to change my feelings. That would have been a vastly different matter. I accepted the big, clumsy, steadfast man. His fidelity touched me deeply. I couldn't bear to think of his ravaged face and to feel that I was daily making it more creased and wan.

But let me confess honestly that it wasn't pity alone that brought the changed resolve.

For once Oswald had chosen his time adroitly. The monsoon was just over. The Burma cold weather held me for the moment helpless in its thrall. Once more I was all for the golden East. In the ordinary course I should have been going to England with my father, who was retiring on a small pension, and the very idea of an existence dragged out in dingy rooms in a grimy London street looking out on endless vistas of drab house-fronts, spiked area railings, and wet pavements reflecting a grey sky fairly appalled me. I felt I couldn't live without hot sunlight and swaying palms and dappled shadows and the sound of pagoda bells mingling with the shrill cry of kites high up in the blue, and so I took the refuge offered me, hoping vaguely for the best.

All this happened more than fifteen years ago.

CHAPTER II

IT astonishes me how quickly those fifteen years passed when I consider that all but five months of the whole was spent under one shingled roof in one dead-alive Eastern port. I only went once to England after my marriage, and then by myself – for a few hurried weeks. It was the year my father died, and the call that reached me was one I dared not disobey. I could, had I wished, have stopped longer at home than I did and, believe me, it was not the grey sky and wet pavements that drove me back to the yellow sunshine and the rustle of the palms. The greyness and the wet had lost their terrors. What cut my visit short was the alarming thought that if I dallied among the primroses much longer I should never pluck up courage to face the return journey to Burma.

I should be sorry to have to say what aching shreds of vital fabric I left behind me in England when I finally tore myself away, but tear myself away I did and came back to Mingin and Oswald and all the narrow, un-English things he stood for – the empty, country-bred gossip of the club, the odious wrangling with native servants, the nightly warfare with mosquitoes, the daily boiling of the drinking-water, the overshadowing dread of cholera and dysentery and plague, the pretentious little dinners, the uneasy business of trying, while appearances were being artificially kept up, to make both ends meet.

I had inherited a little money from my father, which Oswald would never touch, even when he

GREEN SANDALS

was at his lowest, and I used this for one or two short holidays. One year Oswald and I went for part of the hot weather to Darjeeling, but he was unhappy with his feet off the daily tread-mill. 'I'm losing touch, Honoria!' he used to grumble daily. 'I don't know what they're doing in the office while I'm away.' The snow panoramas were wasted on him. He might just as well have been in the Delta. He complained nightly of the cold and was not really happy till he had his nose on the grindstone again.

Not that he was happy even then for any length of time. He ground ceaselessly and, it seemed to me, hopelessly. He was a piece-goods merchant with a horde of watchful competitors. The big firms overshadowed him, the native traders – sly, black, scheming Suratis and Marwaris – undersold him. His personality told against him in the bazaar. He took up paddy for awhile and made nothing of it. Once, in an evil day, he tried to dabble in wolfram and kept making troublous sea journeys in small trading steamers down the Tenasserim coast, but he lacked the needful knowledge, and nothing came of the venture. Whatever his big awkward honest hands touched seemed to wilt and fail. He used to talk about his plans to me, picking at his fingers, swaying in his chair, with the wrinkles coming and going on his white, lined face, and while I watched him I really believed in his business acumen. Disillusionment did not come till later.

All things considered we got on wonderfully well together. Children would, no doubt, have drawn us

GREEN SANDALS

closer to each other, but none came to bridge the gulf that we agreed discreetly to span by a makeshift affair of give and take. We had really few tastes in common beyond our love of music. In the early days he used to try and sing sentimental numbers with that big uncontrolled voice of his that broke alarmingly and without warning and tailed away from a bleat into a bellow, and he always set great store by my accompanying, but, as the years went on and business grew worse and worse, the desire to sing left him and his hair got tinged with grey and the little lean folds of flesh where neck and chin met were matched by more and more fellow furrows on his forehead and deeper crow's-feet round his eyes. Still, my playing was always a comfort to him and, though I was often sorely tempted, I never sold our poor old piano.

We sold a good many things, however, to tide over the lean years – jewellery and ponies and traps and what not – and so managed somehow to preserve the conventional ‘window-dressing’ decencies. We stuck to our office *gharry*, a rattle-trap old conveyance that took Oswald to business every morning and me to the club in the evening, when I wanted to go, which, Heaven knows, was not very often. We were able to keep a presentable sufficiency of servants and even occasionally to give dinners. The syce pulled the punkah and we did without a *durwan* and a cook's mate and a *mali*, though of course the compound suffered. No one guessed how we pinched.

Our Madrasi boy we had for many years. He was

GREEN SANDALS

a surly untidy scamp who never wore a clean waist-belt, but he had one saving grace – he did not drink. The whisky was as safe with him as with the bank, and that one virtue covered a multitude of sins. We had a succession of cooks – Mughls, Goanese, Madrasis – and once a Bengali Mussulman – a Chittagonian with oily locks who stayed with us for quite a long time, though positively the only thing he could make decently was caramel custard. In the end he stabbed a woman in the bazaar and had to go to jail and, being sick of natives of India, I took on a Burman, named San Dun.

I did not like San Dun, but his pock-marked face was at least cheerful and smiling. I knew very little Burmese and his English was as bad as his Hindustani, but we managed to understand each other and get things done in a fashion. His curries were good and he fried well in sesamum oil, but he was a dirty fellow. Women at the club, with their highly-paid *bawarchis*, used to ask me how I could put up with him. They wondered at my employing a Burman at all, and sometimes I wondered too. However, there he was and there he stayed.

He had been a year with us before I found out he was married. Then he brought his wife to live in his go-down – not a pure Burman, I should think. She must have had Indian blood in her – a quiet, intelligent woman, always in a neat white jacket and a decent waist-cloth, with fine eyes which she kept fixed religiously on the ground when I was anywhere near. Ma E her name was.

For a long while I had no dealings with her. She

GREEN SANDALS

just went in and out of the compound. Then I discovered that she was a bit of a needlewoman (she talked about having been taught in a mission school) and I employed her from time to time as a sort of ayah about the house. She asked for no pay, but she was as good as fed from our table, and I used to give her old clothes, which she disposed of somehow, and now and then a scarf or a waist-cloth for her own wear. She used to roll cheroots and sell them in the bazaar and she supplied Oswald with all his smokes.

In time I found out that, for all her quiet ways and downcast looks, she was not an irreproachable character. Some little time after I had taken her up, Mr. Venne, the new Superintendent of Police, came round to see me about her. He was altogether rather mysterious – wouldn't say exactly what he had against her or why it was in me and not in Oswald that he was confiding. He didn't say so in so many words, but he gave me the impression of thinking that Oswald – man-like, where women are concerned – might take too lenient a view of the business and drop a hint to Ma E of what was forward. At the same time he evidently didn't want to make me nervous. 'Don't get rid of her, Mrs. Brendish,' he said. 'She's not a thief. She won't hurt you. Just keep an eye on her and if you *should* notice anything suspicious about her, you might let me know. We like to know where we can find her, if need be.' He murmured something about the 'preventive sections' as he went, but he gave me very little to go upon.

I don't know that I attached much importance

GREEN SANDALS

to the matter at the time. It struck me after he had left that, being new to the district, he might have allowed himself to be unduly influenced by some Burman subordinate who had got a spite (or, as we say in Mingin, a *zid*) against either Ma E or San Dun. There are plenty of cases like that.

I have never cared much about the police, and I must say that I was not particularly taken with Mr. Venne at his first visit. He was so short with one – so critical – so peremptory. He gave me the impression, with his grey eyebrows going up and down, of thinking me rather untrustworthy – which, by the way, made it all the stranger that he should have spoken to me as he did about Ma E. He had known Mingin in the old days and professed to remember me as a girl. In fact, he always seemed to think of me still as a child with my hair down my back and to treat me accordingly. His critical attitude lasted even after he had got to know me better, though, as time went on, he clearly came to the conclusion that my defects were due to infirmity of purpose and not to moral obliquity. I think at the outset he liked me as little as I liked him. It was only later that his antipathy grew into pity. I do think he pitied me. I am sure he pitied Oswald, but that, I imagine, almost every one in Mingin did.

There were a few exceptions to this rule. The people in Blackburns', for instance, disliked him on principle and had no room for pity in them. Blackburn Brothers were the big – the really big – piece-goods people in Mingin. They were competitors of my husband's, and once, in an evil moment, he

GREEN SANDALS

brought a suit against them for infringement of a trade mark. It was a well-known affair at the time. Everybody talked about the Dancing Girl case. The Dancing Girl was the mark on some wretched piece-goods – a hideous blue daub of a thing, not worth quarrelling about, certainly not worth losing money over. I never knew the ins and outs of the business. No one, except the lawyers, extracted any benefit out of the litigation, so far as one could see. Oswald certainly got none; though I believe the decision was mainly in his favour, and in any case he made enemies of Blackburns' for life. All Blackburns' people were quite civil to me, when they came across me, but I know they never had a good word to say for Oswald.

Mr. Baird was head of Blackburns' – the *burra sahib*, as we called it. He lived in a fine bungalow near us, on the ridge. He was a stout, silent Scotchman. His wife was country-bred, a fat, good-natured woman, quite able to make up for her husband's lack of small talk. I rather liked her and I did not mind Mr. Baird. When he did speak, he spoke out his mind, which is more than one could say for some of the other people in Blackburns'.

There was a whole chummery full of the firm's *chokras* living not far off us. There was Mr. Wheeler, a tiresome bald man who wore gold spectacles, and Mr. Blake, a great rider – always to the fore at the paperchases in the rains. And then there was Mr. Staynes.

Mr. Staynes was only recently out from home. He began by fighting shy of us, taking his cue from

GREEN SANDALS

the rest of them, but in the end we got to know him pretty well. He was always rather superior, at first in a distant and later on in a rather flippant fashion, but he sometimes didn't mind letting me into his enthusiasms. As Mr. Wheeler said, he was more like a young civilian than a *box wallah* – the name they used to give the merchants out there. He was very well read, and we used to talk about books and pictures and that sort of thing – a rare experience in Mingin, where most people's souls never soared far above teak and paddy and cutch.

I don't think I should ever have got much out of him if it hadn't been his first experience of the East. He had to pass on the call of the tropics to some one. I was the only person ready to listen to the call and I must confess that he showed me beauties in the station to which I had long been blind. It was like a breath of fresh breeze to come across some one who could wax eloquent over the hang of a monk's yellow robe or the sheen on a fly-catcher's back. Even the patterns woven in the mat walling of the huts in the villages appealed to him. From one corner of the verandah we had a view, through a break in the mango trees, of the ridge behind the town, with white pagodas dotted here and there among the foliage and carved roofs catching the sunlight. 'What a sky line! What a sky line!' he used to say. Then he would add, as though for my special edification, 'There's nothing like it anywhere in Europe!' I used to laugh to myself, for the boy spoke not only as though he had visited every corner of the Old World himself but as though he imagined

GREEN SANDALS

I had never in the whole of my life poked my nose outside Mingin!

Just to show him that I had been home I used sometimes to let myself go in a contrary direction and show him that I was just as much an exile as he was. 'Give me dear old England!' I used to say, and I would dilate on the neatness of the fields – those good Kentish fields one sees first from the train – the fine brown furrows, straight as a die, the clean brown earth of them – so different from the rank slush of the paddy soil. No filthy buffalo wallows there, no grey smelly slime, no festering garbage with vultures stalking round it, no swampy jungle growth; everything trimmed and spruce and well-kept – clipped hedges, flowers in the cottage gardens, white linen hanging out to dry. 'Look at that, now!' I cried out once, pointing to the unruly tangle of the compound – a wild welter of coarse grass and unpruned shrubs. 'Where would one see anything as jungly as that in the Old Country?' He was not to be shaken, however. 'Ah, but look at the colour of that brown monastery against the green!' he would cry. 'Just like a ripe Havana on a young lettuce leaf! What is that green, by the way? . . . Plantains, eh? . . . Ah, why don't you call them bananas? . . . Well, anyway, what wouldn't they give at home for a sight of a clump of plantains in December? Talk about verdure! My stars!'

He was not by any means good looking. Even when he was fresh out from home his face had no more colour in it than Oswald's. It was a face full

GREEN SANDALS

of strange inconsistencies – strong looking and yet woefully weak. There were no youthful curves about it. His nose and forehead made one continuous up and down line across which his straight black eyebrows ran at a stiff right angle. His chin was square and very flat underneath, and when he turned his head sideways you could see no break in the line from his temple to his jaw. Everything was rigid and uncompromising – and yet his slit of a mouth, with no fullness of the lips about it, had no strength in it, and you could never meet his eye. His hair grew low down on his forehead and was rather fine.

I never found out exactly what he thought of Oswald. As for my husband, he couldn't get over the fact of one of Blackburns' people so far breaking with the traditions of the firm as to have friendly dealings with him. He could hardly believe that Mr. Staynes had not some ulterior motive in view in coming so often to the house.

I shall never forget my asking him once if he minded the boy's visits. It was while we were driving to the club in a downpour of rain and, what with the rattle of the *gharry* wheels and the drumming of the drops on the roof; I could barely make out what he said in reply to my question. 'Why should I mind?' was what, judging by the motions of his mouth, he seemed to be asking. 'It's for you to settle, surely.' Then, moving his shoulders alternately and rubbing his fingers with his thumbs, he added something or other about 'making it up with Blackburns'. I know he always treasured

GREEN SANDALS

the possibility of final reconciliation at the back of his mind and, though he didn't say so in so many words, I think he looked to me to do something womanly and discreet in the way of holding out the olive branch.

A moment later he suddenly began speaking again. I could hear practically nothing he said, but I could gather a good deal from the way his lips moved and his eyebrows jerked up and down. 'Your risk, my dear,' those lips seemed to me to be saying, and then he followed this rather cryptic utterance up with more words — many more, I remember, than was his wont, for, except when he was worked up over wolfram or one of the other things he expected to make money by, he wasn't given to long speeches. Now, however, oddly and perversely, he seemed to be taking the opportunity, when I couldn't properly follow what he said, of letting himself go, visibly but inaudibly, about Blackburns' and Mr. Staynes's attentions. It was obviously a great relief to him to be getting the thing, as he would have phrased it, 'off his chest,' and I let him mouth on through the din, but when the noise moderated and I called out to him to speak louder, he only nodded his head and worked his jaws, but did not raise his voice. If anything, he lowered it.

Later on, when we were in peace and quiet again, he refused to tell me what he had said. 'It was nothing,' he replied with a dreary laugh. 'Nothing but what you already know,' and I could only presume that, when he spoke of 'risk' he was thinking of the danger of admitting some one, so to speak, from

GREEN SANDALS

the enemy's camp into close intimacy. I assured him that I should be very, very circumspect, and with that assurance he seemed content. All the same, it was in a way rather disturbing.

CHAPTER III

IT was not very long after this that I first learnt about Oswald's dealings with the Chetties.

He had never borrowed from natives in the past and he had often referred with some heat to the extortions of moneylenders before I realized that he had any first-hand knowledge of their methods. I had never till then dreamt of the possibility of his putting himself into the clutches of one of those Chetties whose black toad faces had repelled me from the very moment when I learnt, as a child, that they were usurers.

One of the most forbidding of this blood-sucking fraternity in Mingin was Allagappa Chetty, who lived near the wharf, in the Goldsmiths' quarter of the town. I had often noticed him squatting in his loin-cloth on the *pucca* floor of his little front verandah, just above the street-level, with a big black tin box close to his elbow.

One day I saw him standing in our compound talking to San Dun and Ma E – a bulging dark man, naked to the waist, girt about with a white cotton *dhoti* that caught up his fleshy paunch in little pulpy folds. He was, as always, bare-headed, and had a small round whitish-yellow caste mark wafered between his bloodshot eyes. His complexion looked like a mixture of ink and curry powder, an unwholesome yellowish black. He was shaven clean – head, chin, lips and, it seemed to me, eyebrows as well – and he was altogether an evil-looking object. Only his big toad's

GREEN SANDALS

mouth was red, stained with betel-juice drippings.

I noticed him particularly, for in all my fifteen years in Mingin I had never seen the fellow outside the Goldsmiths' quarter. It was like seeing prowling in the open a beast one had got accustomed to the sight of behind the bars of a cage, and I felt a little thrill run through me. The man was straddling opposite our people, in the shade of a mango tree, with one end of his cloth slung over his naked shoulder, blinking his lashless lids at the Burmans. Facing him in their gaudy clothes (Ma E had a pink skirt on and a white gardenia in her hair, and San Dun's head-cloth was an orange one) the irresponsible pair looked like a couple of gaily tinted flies hovering, fascinated, round the web of a black, bloated spider. It positively gave me the creeps.

Not a word passed between them, though I watched them for quite a while. Presently some slight noise I made caused them all three to look simultaneously up to where I stood in the upper verandah. San Dun disappeared into the cookhouse with his hands full of onions. Ma E scuttled double quick for her go-down out by the stables. The moneylender moved heavily away towards the compound gate, rolling in his walk like a native fishing-boat in the bay.

I asked San Dun later what the Chetty had come about and he said he did not know.

'Has he been lending you money?' I asked quickly, so as to give him no time to invent an answer. He laughed at the very idea.

'Did he want to see Master?' I went on, and he

GREEN SANDALS

turned up his eyes for a fraction of a second before replying. 'No, not the *thakin*, not the *thakin*!' he said, so earnestly that I could not but think that he was lying.

I was so convinced that he was not speaking the truth that that same evening I told Oswald what I had seen and what San Dun had said. My husband puckered his mouth up till his face was like a bleached walnut shell. 'Ah, that chap Allagappa!' he murmured under his breath. 'The cheek of the animal!' That was all I could get out of him at first, but presently, when he had sat for a while clasping and unclasping his hands in a way I knew well, he suddenly rose to his full height, grabbed at the tea-cosy (we were having tea in the lower verandah) and buried both his hands in it. 'San Dun knows nothing whatever about it!' he exclaimed, pawing, as though he were minded to tug the wadding out of the thing. 'It's quite on the cards the Chetty may have come to see me.'

'What about?' I asked.

'Well, why shouldn't he?' he demanded, dragging one of his hands out of the tea-cosy to rub his chin. 'People have got to be financed, you know. Money doesn't fall from the sky – not in Mingin, any way.'

He looked at me, pulling his lower lip away from his teeth and moving his head to avoid the swing of the punkah. I just looked back at him and presently it all came out, as it generally did when I said nothing but looked hard enough.

He had borrowed money from Allagappa. How

GREEN SANDALS

much he would not say, nor when, but there had been at least two loans. He had gone to the Chetty as a last resort simply because the banks would allow him no more credit. The cash was only needed to carry him over a temporary shortage of funds. 'We're reconstructing . . . reconstructing,' he kept on saying, seeming to derive a deal of comfort from the blessed word and trying to look as though refusal of credit by the banks was quite an everyday happening. 'You can't understand these things, Honoria. No woman ever can. . . . One has to take risks sometimes. . . . If things go all right, I shall repay him in a month.'

'If things go all right?' I repeated. 'You don't mean wolfram, do you?'

'No, it's not wolfram,' he said. 'It's paper from bamboos this time. Fine stuff! Oh, fine! Let me tell you, my dear, that there are some shrewd fellows in it.' He began moving about on the farther side of the tea-table, snapping his fingers restlessly. 'Shrewd fellows!' he repeated, though; when I asked him to tell me who the shrewd fellows were, he only mentioned the name of a rather shady Armenian stevedore.

More than this I could not get out of him. He absolutely refused to say what interest he had to pay for the loans, and all the time he was defending himself it seemed to me that he was insinuating – rather unfairly, I thought – that he wouldn't have had to stoop so low for help if I had been able to work Mr. Staynes's friendship for all he considered it was worth. His attitude worried me!

GREEN SANDALS

This was all very unpleasant, but there was worse to follow. A fortnight or so later I was sitting finishing breakfast in the dining-room which opened on to the lower verandah. Oswald had just got up from the table and was waiting in the verandah for the *gharry* to take him to office. It happened that the Madrasi boy had that morning taken away some of the pots of ferns that stood on a stand outside the dining-room. I thus had a fuller view than usual from within, and from where I sat at the table, scooping aimlessly at a ripe papaya, I could see my husband through the apertures in the venetians standing in his suit of Assam silk and pulling at his cheroot. He did not know I was able to watch him.

All at once I had a glimpse, through the chinks, of a gay yellow skirt close to the Assam silk jacket. Ma E was out in the verandah too, just beside Oswald, and; as I looked, I saw the two come right up to each other and Oswald made something over to the woman – without a word – sideways – as though no one was to see – something that looked small and white – like paper. So they stood side by side, almost touching, for some thirty seconds, and then the office *gharry* came clattering up under the porch. My husband got in, the door slammed and I heard the sound of the wheels going down the drive.

All that time I did not breathe once. I just sat there, poking with my spoon at the black papaya seeds on my plate. When all was quiet outside I got on to my feet and marched out into the verandah.

Ma E was still standing exactly as she had stood,

GREEN SANDALS

very smooth and sleek, with her hair done into a glossy knob and with a spotless canary-coloured *tamein* on. When she heard me coming she turned and began moving away down the verandah with her hands tightly clenched, but I stopped her.

'What have you got there?' I called out, and pointed.

I had kept my eyes on her the whole time, I thought, and had seen her make no movement to put away the thing that Oswald had given her, but, when she held out her thin little brown hands towards me, they were empty.

'What did the *thakin* give you just now?' I asked.

She was a clever actress, the little beast! She seemed quite surprised. 'The *thakin*!' she echoed. 'The *thakin* has gone to office. How can he have given me anything?'

'I saw him give you something before he left,' I said, and with her big black eyes she shot a quick glance over her shoulder towards the dining-room to judge how much I could have seen. She must have noticed the missing pots of ferns and I expected her to admit having been handed something and to be all ready with some cock-and-bull story as to why it had been given to her, but she only shook her head and narrowed her eyes. 'The *thakinma* is mistaken,' she declared.

I took her by the wrist and gave her arm a shake, and on to the concrete out of the sleeve of her white jacket that she clutched to her tumbled a tight little bundle of papers. I could see they were currency notes – about a dozen, I should think.

GREEN SANDALS

I said nothing, but merely pointed again. This was foolish of me. I ought to have got hold of the notes, but I didn't. She twitched the things off the floor with her mouth open furiously and tucked them quickly away in her waist-band. 'That's my money!' she cried. 'My bazaar earnings. The *thakin* gave me nothing!'

'Do you always keep your bazaar earnings up your sleeve?' I inquired hoarsely, and for several seconds we faced each other, breathing hard.

'Look here, Ma E!' I said at last. 'You are not to come inside this house again. Do you understand? I'm not going to have you hanging about like this. If I ever find you in here again, out of the compound you'll go; you and San Dun too. He'll get his *jawab*!' I cried.

She said nothing but tiptoed to the edge of the verandah for her green sandals, picked them up and shuffled away, for once without the jaunty outward turn of the elbow that, as a rule, she affected.

I was a coward. I never told Oswald about this incident. I knew that it was just possible that he might have been able to account for everything. I should have been ready to accept any explanation he chose to give as to why he had handed the notes to Ma E. What I was frightened of was that he should absolutely deny having made anything over to her! I couldn't have borne that! I began picturing to myself how his poor old seamed face would cloud and pucker if I sprang the thing upon him — how he would jerk his knees and rub that big upper

GREEN SANDALS

lip of his and make a wretched business of the lie – for a lie I knew full well it would be. Anything seemed better than that!

In fact I never told any one. I was within an ace of speaking to Mr. Staynes about it a few days later. I had him for an hour or so to myself – all to myself. I knew he would be sympathetic and discreet, but I wanted more than that. Sympathy and discretion don't in themselves help to get things done. I wanted some definite action taken. I looked at Mr. Staynes's square weak face as he sat, puffing cigarette after cigarette in the long arm-chair in the verandah, and I knew I couldn't look to him for anything masterly or prompt. I did take occasion to mention Ma E to him in the hope that, if he knew about her, I might work round to my subject, but her name conveyed nothing to him.

Of course Mr. Venne might have done something. If the truth be told, in spite of his overbearing manner, I very nearly confided in him. He had urged me to let him know if I noticed anything suspicious about the woman, and yet I couldn't think that it can have been any suspicion of *this* kind that he had meant. Probably if he had not been in the police I might have spoken. As it was, I had a horrid fear that he would be all for drastic methods – official, public ones. He would want to take the numbers of the notes and confront the woman with Oswald, and I could have stood that no better than I could poor Oswald's stuttering disavowals.

It was a grievous pity, for in all other respects Mr. Venne would have been far more helpful, with

GREEN SANDALS

his assurance and capacity, then any other living soul in Mingin.

Such is life! . . . The right man in the wrong place. . . . Oh, the irony of it!

Although I did not say anything to Oswald about the matter, I know Ma E did. What is more, I could have told you exactly when she spoke to him and when he began debating in his mind whether to offer me some kind of explanation of what I had seen. I could have told you, for I could see he was going through exactly what I had been going through — experiencing the same doubts, the same misgivings. Oh, didn't I know the symptoms! In the end, like myself, he took the coward's course and decided to say nothing.

The thing didn't improve for brooding over. My imagination ran away with me. I knew there was something between my husband and Ma E. I began to scent all kinds of disreputable intrigues. I actually began wondering whether it was really and truly for trading purposes that my husband had been borrowing money from Allagappa and the idea nearly made me sick. I thought of discharging San Dun and thus getting rid of him and his hateful belongings at one blow. It was only my doubts as to how Oswald would take this move on my part that made me hold my hand. It would bring things to a head. Everything, in that case, would have to come out. That might yet be avoided. For the moment I clung desperately to the hope that the woman might be bundled off without exciting Oswald's suspicions.

GREEN SANDALS

Meanwhile, as a matter of fact, Ma E seemed to have bundled herself off. For fully a fortnight I did not see her once out by the servants' go-downs. San Dun was evasive when I asked him about his wife, but I gathered that she was indisposed. '*Ne ma kaung bu*,' was the way the fellow phrased it, standing in front of me with his bazaar book in his nervous hand and the end of his yellow head-cloth dangling, quivering, over his left eye. She was 'having a bad time of it,' as one might say. *Ne ma kaung bu* covered a lot of things, of course.

CHAPTER IV

AND then, when I thought I had got rid of her, and had begun to breathe a little more freely, she suddenly reappeared, and her reappearance started a fresh lease of trouble.

It was not often that I went out in those days, but, somewhere about the New Year, I was prevailed on to look in at an afternoon dance at the club. People were kind to me there, told me I ought to show myself more, seemed glad I had come. The little unwonted gaiety roused me from my moping, and I came back home feeling more at peace with the world than I had felt for weeks and making all kinds of plans for the future. I discovered on arrival that Oswald was away at chess (he used to play a good deal with Mr. McCutcheon, one of the mill engineers) and that Mr. Staynes was sitting solemnly smoking cigarettes in the lower verandah. He had not been at the dance. He rallied me a little on my dissipated evening, then we branched off on to other topics, and presently he brought all my worries back to me by referring to Oswald's indebtedness. He told me about a case the Chetty had brought against my husband, and then he startled me by wondering whether matters hadn't reached such a pitch that it might be necessary for Oswald and me to leave Mingin. I said I hoped it wasn't as bad as that, not at all sure in my own mind, even as I spoke, that if it were to have this result, this case he talked about might, after all, be a blessing in disguise. He seemed glad to hear that we weren't going to be driven out

GREEN SANDALS

of Mingin by anything the Chetty did or threatened to do. Then, just before he left, he gave a queer little laugh.

'You were talking the other day about your cook's wife,' he said.

Immediately I was all attention. 'Ma E ?' I cried.

'That's the name,' said he. 'You asked me then whether I knew her. Well, I've just discovered I do. A neat little woman, a Zairbadi, I should think; not a pure Burman. She sells cheroots and drugs in the bazaar. I've often bought things from her. I had no idea she was the party!'

'How do you know now?' I asked.

'I've just seen her,' he said.

'Not in the house, I hope,' I exclaimed.

'Well, not exactly,' he returned. 'Out at the end of the verandah there, where that little table is.' And he pointed.

'Did you speak to her?' said I.

'No,' said he. 'She just went past the end of the verandah and was off again directly. She only stopped there a second, on her way from the cook-house or somewhere, I should think. I don't think she noticed me. She looked as though she might have brought something.'

'Brought something!' I echoed. I rose and walked to the end of the verandah, to the point he indicated. 'Do you think this was what she brought?' I inquired, and held up a twist of paper that was lying on the table.

'Can't say,' he replied. 'What is it?'

'It's some white stuff in paper,' I said.

GREEN SANDALS

He came close. I showed him what I had found. It was a scrap of coarse newspaper containing perhaps half an ounce of a whitish drug. It was something I could not identify. 'It isn't soda, is it?' I said, and held the stuff under his nose.

He sniffed delicately. 'No. Certainly not soda,' he returned. He pushed the paper from him with a sudden jerk. 'Does your husband collect butterflies?' he asked.

'He used to once,' I said. 'But that's a long time ago now.'

'Did he have a killing-bottle?' he went on.

'I believe he did,' I said.

'That's it, then,' he said. 'It's stuff for renewing the bottle. Look after it well, Mrs. Brendish. It's not the kind of thing to leave lying about.'

And with that he picked his hat from the verandah rail and went off down the drive.

I stood trembling at the edge of the verandah and watched him go. Once I opened my mouth to call after him, but my voice seemed to stick in my throat and by the time I had got it free he was out of hearing. . . . And, after all, what would have been the good? . . . I knew nothing for certain. I could only suspect. It was all dim and vague, and yet my brain was whirling as though a dagger had been suddenly pointed at my breast. All I could think of at the moment was the fact that I had incurred Ma E's hatred – that she would be glad enough to be revenged on me – that she would probably stick at nothing to achieve her ends.

Was *this* what it meant?

GREEN SANDALS

For whom had the stuff been placed there? Was Oswald privy to the placing? Would he recognize the contents of the paper if he saw them? . . . Would they mean anything to him?

Was it, by any chance, for the purchase of *this* that those notes had furtively changed hands in the verandah?

I was still by the table and still trembling and wondering, when Oswald came in a few minutes later from his chess. He saw me with the paper in my hand and saved me the trouble of making up my mind whether to show it to him or not. 'What's that you've got there?' he asked.

At the moment he so obviously suspected nothing that I began to think that, so far as he was concerned, my misgivings might have been pure moonshine. I held the packet out to him. I let him examine its contents . . . and with agonized eyes I watched his jaw drop slowly. He recognized the stuff, sure enough!

'Who gave you this?' he asked presently. He had to.

'I found it on the table there,' I said. 'I don't know who put it there, though I can guess,' I went on.

He did not wait to be told what my guess would be. 'It's — it's some chemical!' he stammered.

He looked so unutterably shocked and unnerved that my courage forsook me and, to save worse things happening, I gave him the necessary lead: 'Is it for your butterflies?' I asked.

At the word the extremity of horror passed from

GREEN SANDALS

his face. He nodded and swallowed and cleared his throat. 'For my butterflies, of course,' he agreed. 'My old killing-bottle. . . . I ought to have told you. . . . There are some magnificent ones about now. . . . I saw a big blue chap yesterday. . . . Let me have the stuff, Honoria.'

I clutched the paper to me tightly for a breath or two. I knew well enough that if I hadn't mentioned the word 'butterflies' he would still have been groping around desperately for the needful lie. I very nearly turned my back on him to hurl the packet into the middle of the nearest bamboo clump, but I saved myself in time. It was best not to show how frightened I was.

'I think I had better keep it locked up for the present,' I murmured, with my eye on him. I said nothing about Ma E. I would not defile my tongue with her name. He knew well enough!

'As you like,' he returned. He would not face my gaze.

I took the twist of paper upstairs. I did not lock it up that evening. Something prompted me to thrust it away out of sight at the back of one of the drawers of my dressing-table.

It was there one night . . . only one. No one knew of the hiding-place but myself, and yet, when I pulled it out next morning from behind a tangle of ribbons and what not, my heart stood still. For a moment I could have sworn that the paper had been tampered with in the interval. Something – I could not say what – looked different. I turned the wretched thing over and over in my hand, weighing

GREEN SANDALS

it — up and down and then up again — peering at it from every angle. Then I wondered whether I hadn't made an idiotic mistake and began to breathe more easily, and next moment I was seized with a sudden feeling that I should never breathe really freely again until the detestable stuff was destroyed and could alarm me no more.

I burnt the paper and everything in it. It is not so easy to burn things on the sly in the East as it is at home. There are no convenient fires in grates that one can use on the quiet when no one is looking. I remember my sensations as I stood in the gloom of the bathroom, with all the venetians closed, watching the last of the flames leaping round the blackening paper, feeling as sick as if I had actually swallowed a mouthful of the cruel white chemical. By that time I did not seem to care much whether anything had been abstracted from the package or not. It was really all one. I had benefited myself but little by destroying the stuff. No doubt there was plenty more where that had come from.

I was letting my mind range dully over the past. I remember it all ended in my saying, passionately and out loud, 'Why should *he* want to?'

Why should *he*? . . . That was it! I never said 'Why should *she*? God knows, I had given the woman little enough cause to love me! It struck me as the most natural thing in the world that she should want to poison me. But why should *he*? I recollect the sound of my voice ringing out again — almost comically — through the dark airless bathroom. 'But I've been a good wife to him!'

GREEN SANDALS

Why did they *both* want it? . . . Why did they want it *now*? . . . Why should they have planned it together? . . . What common object could they have had in wanting to get rid of me? . . . I couldn't imagine!

I called to mind cases of poisoning I had heard of. As often as not there had been another woman in the case. . . . Jealousy. . . . Was Ma E the other woman, or was it . . . ?

I began, with a sudden gasp, to wonder whether all the trouble had not started from the way in which I had let Mr. Staynes come so constantly to the house. That intimacy, slight at first, had grown, I knew, into something noticeable. It might well have become the subject of gossip. And what had Oswald been thinking about our relations all the time? . . . A little thing came back to me with a stab like the point of a pen-knife — how, in the rain-storm in the office *gharry*, he had said it was my 'risk' being friendly with the boy! Did this awful — this unthinkable thing body forth the risk, then?

And had his intrigue with Ma E been merely my husband's reply, so to speak, to my friendship with Mr. Staynes? Was this his way of getting on even terms with me?

I seldom sleep well, but that night, believe me, I never shut my eyes. Shuddering horrors crept over me — foolish horrors, you will call them, for, after all, I had only the wildest of suspicions to go upon. Was it for me, that stuff, furtively left for Oswald to find, or was it (there was no limit to the flight of my

GREEN SANDALS

morbid imaginings) was it meant, by any chance, for young Staynes? How was I to find out? Whom was I to protect?

My only crumb of comfort at this stage was that, knowing that I had seen the butterfly poison – that my suspicions might have been aroused, they would be chary about taking further final action, at any rate for some little time. Perhaps they would alter their whole plan of campaign.

Nevertheless, I began considering immediately what they could administer it in. . . . Tea? . . . Coffee? . . . Claret? . . . I went through them all, panic-stricken. I remember thinking that I could at any rate avoid eating and drinking things that I saw Oswald refuse. And yet, with Ma E near the kitchen, able to choose her own time, who could count on being safe for long?

I tried to get solace from the reflection that, if Ma E had wanted to poison me there would have been no object in her putting the stuff on the table for Oswald to find. She could do her business without that formality. And yet whichever way I looked I saw her hand in the affair and no comfortable promptings could make me believe that that hand was not lifted against me.

All through that night I heard Oswald tossing on his hot bed in the dressing-room where he slept and wondered what dark plans he was weaving in the night watches.

Somewhere in the small hours it occurred to me that I ought to tell Mr. Venne about the matter. He seemed to be the only person standing between

GREEN SANDALS

me and a cruel death. He had told me to let him know anything suspicious about Ma E.

Immediately Oswald had gone to office next morning I sent round a note to Mr. Venne asking him to come and see me. The messenger returned with my letter in an hour saying that the Sahib had gone into the jungle for a few days.

I was, oddly enough, almost relieved when I heard this. Even in this short space of time my first paroxysm of unreasoning fear had subsided to some extent. I was glad to defer action for a space. Nothing was likely to happen for a day or two. In any case I was forewarned and forearmed. It wasn't as though they could thrust the stuff by main force down my throat! . . . I had eyes in my head.

It wasn't so easy, though, after the day or two they would have required for disarming suspicion had elapsed. For a week my feelings were ghastly. At one moment I was all ready to cry out at myself for a morbid traitress, then something out of the common at meals – a discoloration in the food – white spots in the sauce – and my horrors were all re-born. Soon every meal became a long-drawn agony. Whenever a dish came in from the kitchen I used to whisper to myself, 'San Dun prepared this. Ma E may have been at his elbow all the time.' . . . I took feverish note of Oswald. I kept my eye on what he ate and what he passed at table.

We had a curry for dinner about the third day of that week – one of San Dun's own particular savoury messes. I could tell by the smell as it was borne in that the seasoning would have smothered any un-

GREEN SANDALS

accustomed flavour. The Madrasi boy was for handing the dishes round, beginning with me. I made him put them on the table and helped Oswald myself, giving him the portion nearest me, the spoonful that I myself would ordinarily have taken. He looked carefully at the food, tasted the tiniest scrap, and put his spoon and fork down, with his nose twitching. I watched him as a cat watches a bird, my own nose twitching too.

'I don't think I'll have any,' he said.

'Isn't it nice?' I inquired, trying to control my breathing and noting every movement of his throat.

'It's all right,' he said. 'But I have no appetite.'

He rubbed his mouth with his napkin. I could almost have sworn that he rubbed his tongue as well.

'I don't think I'll have any either,' said I. 'David, take it away.' There was stony silence till the next course came, and all the time I felt ready to jump up from the table and scream. I knew that, even if I had escaped it that time in the curry, I should probably get it in something else.

Looking back now, I seem to have lived for the next day or two almost entirely on boiled eggs and plantains. They couldn't tamper with *them* unknown to me. I drank only soda water and saw every bottle opened in my presence. I would pass the regular dishes and ask, without warning, for biscuits or fruit. Oswald noticed my vagaries and commented on them once or twice. 'You've grown extraordinarily faddy, Honorial' he cried out on one occasion. At moments when he talked like this I almost doubted whether he had any guilty know-

GREEN SANDALS

ledge, but then on other occasions I caught his eyes fixed furtively and significantly upon me. Even if I had never seen the killing-bottle stuff on the verandah table, I should have guessed that he had some terrible load on his mind.

I tried to think that what was worrying him was his indebtedness. But, disturbing as it was, I recognized that it couldn't have been the thought of the Chetty only that made him twitch so by day and toss so by night.

Never at any time would he speak to me now about his affairs. It was mainly from Mr. Staynes that I learnt that they were going from bad to worse. It appeared that Allagappa had got a decree for a big sum against Oswald and was preparing to make himself nasty. In a way it seemed to me that the nastier the black creature made himself the better it might be, in the end, for us. If a crash came and Oswald were made insolvent, we might, as Mr. Staynes had once hinted, be forced to leave Mingin. At times I had wonderful dreams of starting fresh again elsewhere. I was convinced that in a new station, away from Ma E's baneful influence, I could draw Oswald to me again. There was no possibility of that so long as we remained in Mingin.

CHAPTER V

At that time I seized on every opportunity of eating my meals at some other house than my own. Unfortunately I did not get many chances. I had long lost the knack of getting invited out to tiffin, for I had dropped out of intimate relations with most of my women friends. I went little to the club. I did not play cards. Tea was the only meal I could easily avoid taking at home and tea happened to be the meal that mattered least.

I shall never forget my sensations when, early in February, I received an invitation from the Bairds to dinner on the following Friday. It was welcome if for no other reason than as a chance of eating good food without the accompaniment of haunting horrors. But it was more than that – a great deal more. I had not been inside the Bairds' house for nearly two years – not since the unfortunate Dancing Girl case. This advance seemed to show that Blackburns' wanted to bury the hatchet. I confess I almost cried with relief when I opened Mrs. Baird's letter. It came to me like a red streak of dawn after the torture of a spectre-ridden night. It occurred to me as just possible that Blackburns' might even be considering the possibility of helping Oswald to tide over the evil days, and I felt confident – though for the life of me I could not say why – that if my husband's financial pressure could be eased, he would look with different eyes on me and the rest of the world. For the first time for many months I began to think that those that were with

GREEN SANDALS

me were more than those that were against me.

I showed Oswald the letter the moment he came back from office, watching him as he got heavily out of our ramshackle old *gharry* – hoping that he would be reasonable. ‘We have nothing to do on Friday, so I’ve accepted,’ I said. I looked him up and down while he read it. ‘I’ve accepted,’ I said again, to make sure of his taking it in.

He pulled off his *topi* and turned the square white envelope dully in his hand, with a trickle of perspiration running down his nose. I could tell that he did not see in the invitation the happy visions that I did. ‘I suppose we ought to go,’ he muttered in a non-committal way.

‘They want to be kind to us. We can’t afford to refuse it,’ I said. It was a relief to find he did not resent my having, so to speak, forced his hand. ‘Friday, is it?’ he observed a moment later. ‘Well, make it so.’ He stared up at the roof of the porch. ‘Friday isn’t a bad day,’ he remarked, half to himself.

I was delighted at finding him so amenable. ‘Not a bad day except for starting on a journey,’ I cried with a little laugh. We had always made rather a joke of the fact that the little steamer that ran down the Tenasserim coast always started on a Friday.

He moved his head sombrely from side to side. ‘I’m not so very sure about that,’ he returned. He moved away from me to hang up his *topi* at the bottom of the stairs. ‘Not at all a bad day,’ he murmured as he went. ‘A letter to come – that’s Mrs. Baird’s. A journey to go – no, not at all a bad day

GREEN SANDALS

for a journey to go!' And then he gave a little laugh, as though he had said something rather funny.

I hardly saw him on the Friday of the dinner. He rose early, saying he could not sleep. He took a long walk before breakfast and left for office the moment the meal was over. 'I've got a lot to do. I shan't be back till late,' he informed me, though, as a matter of fact, he came home a good deal earlier than usual from the town, and after tea went into his little writing-room on the ground floor. There he certainly was busy, tearing up papers and locking and unlocking boxes. He was still there, hard at it, when I went up to my room to dress for dinner.

It was nearly eight o'clock when I was ready, tricked out in the war paint I so seldom put on. I came down into the lower verandah, expecting to find Oswald there. He was neither there nor in his dressing-room. I went through into the downstairs room where he had been sitting, but it was dark and empty of every living thing but mosquitoes.

I called David, the Madrasi boy. He came to me with his *pagri* on one side, not expecting me to need him again. 'Where's Master, David?' I asked.

'Master done gone out,' he said.

'Gone out! Where?' I cried.

He stared this way and that. 'To Mr. McCutcheon's place,' he said, never at a loss.

'To Mr. McCutcheon's place!' I echoed. 'Did you see him go?'

'Yes, ma'am,' he assured me. 'Only now he's just gone. Myself I seen him.'

GREEN SANDALS

'Was he dressed for dinner?' I asked.

'No, ma'am,' he said. 'Not wearing black clothes. In office clothes going. Therefore I surely think he is going to the engineer's place.'

It was obvious that the wretched Oswald had forgotten all about our engagement. Maddening was not the word for it, but there was nothing for me to do. I could not now get hold of him in time. The office *gharry* drove up from the stables while I stood on the steps, fuming. I got into it and drove off by myself to dinner.

I apologized to the resplendent Bairds for Oswald's absence as best might be, talking of 'Burma head' and what not to account for it. As a matter of fact, I don't believe anyone thought that the invitation had really slipped his memory. The Bairds themselves, I know, were convinced either that he had never intended coming or that his courage had oozed out of his finger-tips at the last moment. I don't know that they blamed him. They knew he wasn't built quite like other people.

The dinner was an unusually formal one, even for Mingin. It seemed to me that nearly half the station was there. The Commissioner took Mrs. Baird in. The Deputy Commissioner, the Executive Engineer and the other principal officials had been asked, and all the business houses were represented. The proportion of bachelors and grass widowers in the station was high, and to my surprise I discovered that though, commercially speaking, we were small fry, I was that evening the *burra mem* and bound for the dining-room on our host's arm. I don't know

GREEN SANDALS

whether he had arranged it himself or not; but Mr. Staynes had been put on the other side of me so that I did not greatly suffer from Mr. Baird's conversational disabilities. I can vouch for it that Mr. Baird, at any rate, enjoyed his dinner. I did nothing to check his absorption of his tinned asparagus, his rice birds and his *pâté de foie gras*. All I recollect thinking as I watched him champ his way through the menu was how easy it would be to put some white stuff into *his* victuals without his noticing it.

It was a regular old-fashioned Mingin *burra khana* that they gave us. I seem to remember that we had turkey somewhere about half-way through. It was almost the only thing I ate.

The men sat on for a long time after the ladies had left the table, so long that very soon after they had joined us in the drawing-room, I snatched at the senior lady's prerogative and got up to go.

I left, just as I had come, with apologies on my lips. 'I'm sorry, Mrs. Baird, but I must go and see about that good man of mine,' I said. 'I can't understand his going off without a word. I've got to find out what he's up to.'

It was gospel truth that it was to find out what Oswald was 'up to' that I was leaving so hurriedly. Sitting there in the drawing-room, with the other women chattering all round me about servants and babies and bazaar prices, I had had time to think things over and to wonder and wonder and yet again wonder whether there might not be some design in his oversight.

Two chance remarks overheard at the dinner-

GREEN SANDALS

table had started me off on a train of morbid imaginings. Each let a little more light on the dark places.

The first told me that Mr. McCutcheon was not in Mingin. He had gone for a few days to Rangoon. It was clear then, to begin with, that David's theory as to where his master was going in his office kit was completely off the mark. I had been willing to accept it for want of a better and I could think of no better ones now – only far worse ones.

The second remark was to the effect that a tramp steamer which had been some time in the harbour loading up with timber was leaving that night for Europe direct. A chance phrase of Oswald's came back to me as I sat; a little apart from my companions, sipping my coffee and turning over the pages of one of Mrs. Baird's portentous photograph albums. What was it he had said about Friday? . . . 'Friday's not a bad day.' (Yes, that was it!) 'Friday's not a bad day . . . for a journey to go.'

Thoughts flashed through my brain, flickered from opposing sides, met and concentrated on one special point to illumine it. An extraordinary fancy seized me and kept me fast. Allagappa had got a decree against Oswald – might be selling him up within a few weeks. The disgrace of insolvency loomed large. Had my poor husband thought of *this* way of escape from his creditors? Was this feverish tidying up of papers in the back room just his final preparation for flight?

You will hardly believe me, but at first the idea brought with it a sense almost of relief. If this had

GREEN SANDALS

been in his mind all along, there could, I reflected, have been nothing in my grotesque suspicion that he was trying to poison me. I remember whispering savagely into the coffee cup I was holding to my lips, 'Well, anyway, he can't be taking Ma E with him to Europe!'

Then, when the idea, after some preliminary wobbles, got firmly planted in my mind, a kind of fury seized me. The fact of his leaving me behind to face Mingin alone was, oddly enough, a mere detail, but why? . . . why hadn't he told me beforehand? . . . Did he distrust me? . . . me; who, assured of his love, would have gone through fire and water for him? I could picture myself scheming – intriguing – for him; planning a way – even this unheroic way – out for him – content, so I was his trusted ally in the planning, to stop behind and 'face the music' by myself. I could see no limit to my passionate conniving devotion. But to do the whole thing behind my back like this! . . . With Ma E's knowledge and aid, perhaps! It stabbed like knives!

Trembling and cold on that stuffy evening, with the punkahs barely moving overhead, I possessed myself in patience as best I could till the time for leaving came. Then, as I say, I went, *distrain*, apologizing.

Several of the guests had followed me down into the big lower verandah by the time that my *gharry* drove up under the porch. Looking this way and that as I went down the steps, I was aware of Mr. Staynes standing close to me alongside a big palm in a tub. I suddenly discovered that I needed him

GREEN SANDALS

badly – that I might conceivably need him for some time. Something prompted me to call out, ‘Can I give you a lift?’

‘Please,’ he said, his face lighting, and he stepped into the *gharry* after me.

Nothing escapes the gossips of Mingin. The people in the verandah – those flushed diners with their crumpled shirt fronts – seemed to be watching us and smiling to each other as we drove off together – just as, across the dinner-table an hour earlier, they had seemed to be noting and nodding significantly at our exchange of subdued conversation during the meal.

Little I cared, now!

CHAPTER VI

So little did I care what people thought – so furious was I with my absent Oswald – that presently I found my tongue running away with me.

The *gharry* passed down the long drive, lined with *padauk* trees, into the warm night. The ponies jogged sedately over the soft laterite of the road. The moonlight poured in through the venetians and flooded us. I could see Mr. Staynes's white shirt-front banded, zebra-like, with alternate strips of light and shadow. He was leaning back on the cushions and looking me through and through.

I leant forward on my seat and brought my face close to his. 'Did you see them laughing at us?' I asked.

He put his chin down and hunched his shoulders a little. 'No, I didn't notice,' he said.

'They were, though,' said I, and I laughed a low inane laugh just to show how little I cared. 'Isn't it absurd of them?' I went on. I began to cast my mind back. 'They put you next door to me at dinner on purpose,' I went on. 'They're beginning to talk, you know.'

'Of course it's absurd,' he agreed. 'Why shouldn't you give me a lift? And why shouldn't I see you home? I'm only doing what your husband asked me to.'

At this I gave a jump. 'What! Did he ask you to see me home to-night?' I asked.

'No, no,' he said. 'But the other day he made a

GREEN SANDALS

point of asking me to be kind to you – to “keep on being kind to you” was his expression.’

‘How do you mean “kind” to me?’ I asked.

He caught and twisted the window-strap. ‘Well, look after you generally, I suppose,’ he muttered. ‘That’s what he said, anyway. Look here, Mrs. Brendish, I hope you’re not going to let this Chetty chap drive you away from Mingin!’

At this I peered closer at him. ‘Why do you say that?’ I cried suspiciously. ‘Did Oswald say anything to you about leaving the place?’

‘Not a word!’ he exclaimed. ‘I was only wondering –’

He did not tell me what he was wondering about. He seemed to treat the sentence as finished, but he did not lean back in his seat. He evidently preferred to do his wondering in the ‘kindest’ way, with his face very close to mine. I could hear his breath coming and going.

I could not let him wonder indefinitely. I was all at once madly aware that in this mood of distracted desolation I needed some one to cling to. Here was some one, anyway – some one callow, inexperienced, vain, but full of young enthusiasm and ready to go through fire and water for me – some one, moreover, to whom, it now appeared, Oswald had handed me over till I could rejoin him in England, or wherever he purposed flying. I almost laughed out loud at the poor simpleton’s trust, and then and there (Heaven help me!) made a vengeful resolve that, if that was how the land lay, my fugitive husband would find me playing up to

GREEN SANDALS

him in a manner wholly unexpected. Kind to me, indeed! . . . After a minute or two I held out my hand to my companion. 'Then you're going to be kind to me, aren't you?' I said.

The boy clasped my fingers and held them tight. 'Ra-ther!' he exclaimed fervently.

'I shall need kindness,' I went on in a doleful whimper. 'I can see nothing but trouble ahead.'

'For Heaven's sake don't bother about your debts!' he cried.

'Our debts! I'm not thinking about them!' I returned. 'It's other things that are worrying me. There are horrors in front of me. Horrors!' My mind was full of the idea of coming back to the house and finding Oswald's place empty. I hardly knew what I was saying but I know I pulled my fingers from between his and covered my face with both hands. I felt him touching my knee sympathetically.

'Whatever happens, though, you mustn't think ill of me,' I murmured at last. 'Think the best of me you can. God knows I've had provocation enough!'

'Provocation!' he cried. 'What kind of provocation?'

'I can't tell you now,' I said.

We had only had a short distance to cover. Our drive was already at an end. We were jingling under the trellised porch of our bungalow. The ponies pulled up. The syce jumped down and opened the carriage door. David, who had been

GREEN SANDALS

dozing somewhere in the back regions, came forward, hitching at his waist-band.

We both got out and stood side by side on the verandah steps, feeling that the matter couldn't possibly end there. The *gharry* creaked away down the drive towards the stables. I sent David off to fetch some soda-water and ice. Mr. Staynes and I were together alone in the dim lamplight.

I looked round me. There was only the one wall-lamp down below. Upstairs it was all as dark as pitch. I was suddenly seized with a panic. What if I went up there into the darkness and found Oswald gone? How could I bear it alone? . . . The awful desolation of it! . . . I turned to my companion. 'Don't go just yet,' I said. 'I want you to wait a little.'

'I'll have a whisky and soda first, if I may,' he said. 'And mind,' he added, 'you've got to tell me what kind of provocation.'

'Provocation!' I said suddenly. 'Look there!'

He rose from the chair into which he had sunk and peered across the dimly lighted verandah towards the point my finger indicated. Out at one end of the cement flooring, near the head of the steps, lay a pair of small green sandals. They were sandals such as Burmese women wear. I had often seen them before. They showed there was some one in the house — upstairs — against orders — some one who had taken advantage of my absence to arrive for some underhand profligate purpose.

'Do you see those?' I demanded with cold emphasis. 'Don't ask me about provocation after *that*!'

GREEN SANDALS

He was a little short-sighted, slow to take things in. 'Whose are they?' he demanded, shading his eyes from the lamplight.

I did not tell him whose, but I walked up to the sandals — those shabby little green traitors lying there on the cement — and I kicked them over the edge of the verandah into the compound. Then I turned to Mr. Staynes.

'Don't go yet,' I entreated. 'I shan't be away upstairs long. Wait till I come back. Tell David he can go to bed when he has brought the whisky and soda.'

He would have liked to have some further explanation then and there, but he seemed content to wait.

'All right,' he said.

I left him standing, puzzled, by his long arm-chair and went up the stairs to the upper storey of the house. I went quietly, but not in the least furtively. Why should I care who heard me?

And then, as I mounted the steps, my mood seemed to change. It struck me that I had been criminally foolish to confide like this in the boy Staynes. Who was he that I should wash my dirty linen in his presence? I had had a vague idea, when I asked him to stay, that a witness would be needed for my purposes. I had already begun to think of Oswald on the high seas, flying from Mingin for ever, and I had wanted some one to be there to see how scandalously I had been treated. And now, suppose Oswald were really upstairs — in bed — able, in spite of everything, to account in some sort of way for the presence of the sandals downstairs. I

GREEN SANDALS

went up, step after step, hoping that I should hear his voice calling to me out of the darkness to come to bed. I felt I would give anything in the world to find that my wild suspicions had no foundation — that he was still in the house — that I was free to send the Staynes boy about his business.

And yet, when I discovered that my imaginings had been actually groundless I was not a bit relieved. It came over me suddenly that Oswald had been arousing my suspicions by false pretences and making a fool of me. I began to wonder whether the sandals below might not have been just part of a scheme designed to give me a shock.

My bedroom was quite dark, but there in my husband's dressing-room beyond there was a dim light showing faintly on each side of the lowered *pardah*.

I went through the bedroom and pulled the *pardah* softly back. The lamp within was turned low, but I could see the top of Oswald's head and his elbow projecting from the top and side of the easy chair in which he sat with his back to me.

He seemed to be asleep or, at any rate, pretending to be asleep. I thought probably the latter; in fact, as I stood and watched, I felt certain it was the latter. He was keeping quite quiet and listening.

Had I, by any chance, surprised him before he could get away to the steamer?

I refused to be drawn—not at the moment, any way. I let the *pardah* drop noiselessly and tiptoed back through the bedroom into the upper verandah. I stood there, doing my own share of listening. The

GREEN SANDALS

mosquitoes were trumpeting shrilly round my head in the gloom. I heard David pattering officiously down below, bringing the whisky and soda. After a while he retired, yawning, to his go-down. I stood there where I was, even after all was quiet below. I wanted to think things out for myself.

There was clearly no object in keeping Mr. Staynes. Whether or not he were shamming sleep, whether or not he could account satisfactorily for the green sandals, Oswald was indubitably there in the flesh. He had not fled from his creditors. Moreover, he was alone. There was nothing that I could prove against him. I should now have to go down to young innocence, there in his long arm-chair, and make as light as I could of my previous worried ramblings about provocation and the like. I should have a little laugh with him over my fussing anxieties and then – when he had finished his whisky and soda – I should let him go. Then, and not till then, should I come upstairs and, if need be, have it out with Oswald. I still wanted to know about the sandals.

To this end I presently began to move across the upper verandah. I halted for a moment when I had reached the head of the steps. Peering down over the balustrade I could see that David had turned the downstairs lamp up a little. I had a glimpse of Mr. Staynes lying in his arm-chair in the lower verandah, puffing at a cigarette and slapping from time to time at the mosquitoes.

Anyone who, waiting close at hand in the darkness, had been listening to the creak of my footsteps,

GREEN SANDALS

would, no doubt, have supposed me at that precise moment to have begun descending the stairs. I can certainly account in no other way for the fact that I had barely stood where I was ten seconds before I heard the sound of hushed movement behind me, as of some one who had been lurking in hiding and, now that the coast was clear, was taking the opportunity to slip quietly away. It was not Oswald, I knew. It was some one nearer than he, who was moving bare-footed from point to point. I could hear a hand passing along the wooden walling and, as I looked, unseen myself in the gloom by the stair-head, I saw a small white-jacketed figure tip-toe over the creaking boards from one of the doors opening on to the verandah to the other, duck past the hangings and tread softly towards the back of the house.

For a moment I stood transfixed by this further proof of treachery; then I made a quick rush in the direction of the still shaking curtain behind which the white jacket had disappeared.

It was quite a short rush, ending as quickly as it had begun. Before I had reached the curtain, pride and scorn had pulled me up short. Why on earth should I stoop to violence – personal chastisement? There was no need to tell me who the wearer of the white jacket was. Hadn't I seen the tell-tale sandals downstairs. Still, there was nothing in *that* way I could do at the moment that I could not equally well do next morning – after a word or two with the man shamming sleep there in his dressing-room!

I knew he must have heard the scuffle and the

GREEN SANDALS

rush, nor did I wish to conceal them from him. . . . But I did from the boy below!

There was no need for young Staynes to know anything. I had suddenly discovered that I had a use for him. I was particularly anxious that he should not be startled or annoyed.

My heart was thudding like a steam-engine. I bit my lip, I clenched my hands. I tried hard to be composed and quiet. Only thus could I be sure of him.

Gradually I found I was able to govern my breathing. I put my hand to my cheek and made the discovery that my fingers were as cold as my cheek was hot. I now realized that for nearly a minute my lips had been moving mechanically and was presently aware of what I had been whispering below my breath. It was just six short words, feverishly repeated, and I remember thinking as they came out, one after the other, how vindictive they sounded.

After a further minute's resolute schooling my breath began coming as regularly as it was likely to come that night. It was at least with outward composure that I could now set about my further business. I cast one more glance towards the dressing-room where all was still silent. Then, still whispering softly to myself, I started stepping slowly over the matting of the stairs down to the lower verandah, where the boy lay stretched in the long arm-chair by one of the house posts.

And, as I went down, step by step, I kept on repeating the six short words to which I had just

GREEN SANDALS

found my lips moving. Each time the phrase lasted out four steps – like this – ‘Two can . . . play at . . . *that* . . . game! . . . Two can . . . play at . . . *that* . . . game!’ There were sixteen steps altogether, so you see I said it four times as I went down and each time it sounded a little more vindictive than the time before.

II. STAYNES CARRIES ON

CHAPTER VII

ALMOST the very first thing they told me about Mingin was that the rainfall there was two hundred inches. That was half an hour after my first arrival in Rangoon, at Blackburns', where I learnt that I was not going to work in the head office, but was being posted to the Mingin branch. I had never even heard of Mingin before and I give you my word that two hundred inches conveyed precious little to me beyond a two and two noughts. It sounded the deuce of a lot, certainly, when one came to think of it, but I quite saw that if you came out to a place like Burma at all, you were bound to run across fairly high quotations. One of the first things that occurred to me when they mentioned the figures was that I could have done very well at the moment with some of those two hundred inches over me, for it was March when I arrived and March in Rangoon rhymes, believe me, very appositely with 'parch.' It was as hot as Nebuchadnezzar's furnace and even under Blackburns' punkah I should have been very glad of a wet towel round my head.

For purposes of comparison I asked Philipson, the man who had told me, what the rainfall in Rangoon was. He said only about a hundred inches.

'Is that a month?' I asked in my simplicity (they seemed to reckon everything by the month there), and he said, 'Oh, Lord! make it a year!' and I remember thinking of the thing in a new light and holding out the handkerchief I had been mopping

GREEN SANDALS

my forehead with and saying, 'I'll undertake to shed a hundred inches in a good deal less than that!'

I don't think that he quite liked a *chokra* who hadn't been an hour in the country talking like that. He was one of the *burra sahibs* of Blackburns', you see, and carried his head rather high. 'You wait till you get to Mingin, young man!' he grunted, looking me up and down. 'The boat starts at 7 a.m. tomorrow from the Sule Pagoda wharf. If you want to get anything here before you start, you had better hurry up about it.'

'Aren't there shops in Mingin?' I asked. I thought I was going to be shipped off to the very back of beyond.

'Bless you, we're not as jungly as *that*!' was his reply.

He was very good to me, Philipson was. A tallish man with a sallow face and a pretty wife who spoilt everything by wearing outrageous *topis*. He drove me to the Cantonment in the evening and put me up for the night in his timbered bungalow near the race *maidan*. I never saw him again. He died of cholera three months later and his wife went home.

I was taken to the Gymkhana that evening and played tennis for the first time in my life on a *pucca* court, finding it a distressingly fast game after grass, and what with the heat and the running for the short ones and jumping for lobs, I shed a good many of my hundred inches before dinner.

Next morning I was down at the wharf in good time for the Mingin steamer, being introduced in good earnest to the smell of *ngapi* and cutch. It was

GREEN SANDALS

a stifling morning, I recollect; after a breathless night, and all the harbour odours reached one in warm pungent waves. There had been a hint of white mist over things early but that morsel of freshness had all been sucked up into the blue by the sun, and there was not air enough even to stir the dangling fronds of the coco-nut palms on the river front. The green of the trees where it was free of dust stood out with a kind of vivid fierceness from the red of the laterite of the roads. One's clothes stuck to one disgustingly even at this early hour and everything felt sickly and breathless. I had been glad enough, thirty-six hours earlier, to see the last of the sea, but I must confess that as I stepped up the gangway of the ferry steamer I revelled in the prospect of a few more hours out of the dust under flapping awnings.

It was cooler the moment we started down the Rangoon river. The worst of the ship's smells were carried away aft and our little paddler made breeze enough to make the awnings flap finely and cool us and dry us, and put us quite at peace with our surroundings, long before we had passed Elephant Point and were out on the waters of the Gulf of Martaban.

I was quite sorry when the short sea trip was over, though there was not much novelty in it, for the approach to Mingin was much the same as what I had seen two days earlier coming up to Rangoon from Colombo. The sea turned gradually from blue-grey to green and from green to brown. In due course a flat coast made a grey rim on the horizon ahead. The rim darkened imperceptibly; black trees seemed to sprout up from it against the skyline

GREEN SANDALS

and presently we found ourselves steaming into the mouth of a big river. The sun, which was burning low in the west, lay right astern when we sighted mangrove swamps and paddy fields and lines of palms. Then the ground rose a little and, far inland, ahead of us, we could see a misty chain of mountains, higher than anything that had been visible near Rangoon. Thatched villages nestling in plantation groves came into sight between the rice plain and the jungle. Presently over the bows of the vessel, between the river and the distant blue range, we could make out a darkish blur of buildings — masts and funnels and mill chimneys with a low undulating stretch of sunlit hills immediately behind it, which, as we steamed closer, became dotted with white pagodas. Seen thus, the brown of the inhabited foreshore merged gradually into the green of the jungle-clad ridge and all along the slope red roofs were hinted at among the trees. Down by the water's edge we could presently distinguish *pucca* houses and a low medley of grey corrugated iron roofs and from where the buildings were thickest a black timbered jetty stuck out into the tide. Everything grew bigger and broader and more distinct; the channel narrowed, we skirted the bank where, well above the muddy high-water mark, we could see strange brown curved native boats being fashioned in noisy primitive shipyards. Craft of the same kind now began to swarm, bobbing, round us on the river.

There was a gathering of shabby hackney carriages waiting on the road at the landward end of the

GREEN SANDALS

black jetty, and on the jetty itself and along the river front backed by a huddle of buildings a crowd of Burmans in white jackets and natives of India had collected to see the boat come in. We went alongside, hooting and splashing, and a European in a buff coat and white ducks detached himself from the motley throng and was the first to come across the gangway, followed by a big Indian in white with a green band across his *pagri*. The European was a sleek little chap with big gold-rimmed pince-nez, and I knew by the description that Philipson had given me of him that this must be Wheeler, of Blackburns'. He stepped blinking up to me, showed a lot of gold in his teeth, and held out a moist, limp hand.

'You're Staynes, I expect,' he said. 'Baird asked me to come down and meet you. Stuffy evening, isn't it? Well, how do you like it? . . . Good passage, eh? Have you got much kit?'

He took charge of me forthwith, in much the same way as Philipson had done in Rangoon. I had not minded Philipson's patronage, but this was different. Wheeler was much younger than Philipson, in fact only a few years older than I was – though already beginning to get bald – and with an oily briskness that compared poorly with Philipson's peremptory drawl.

'You're coming to chum with me and another chap,' he announced, patting his leg with the fly-whisk he carried. 'Did you get a boy in Rangoon? . . . No? . . . Well, I'll get my fellow to find you one. Show the office peon your traps, will you?'

GREEN SANDALS

He'll take them up to the house. You needn't bother about them. Baird wants to see you *ek dum*.' And he marched me off firmly on to the wharf.

It struck me as being all very much like Rangoon on a small up-country scale. I hadn't an eye for the distinguishing shades then. With the stoppage of the steamer I had started perspiring again profusely. We drove up from the river front in Wheeler's high dog-cart, with a black-faced Madras syce sitting on the back seat, through the dusty native bazaar, all low houses of brick or wood roofed with corrugated iron and interspersed with bamboo booths, where they sold fruit and sweetmeats and silks, across the *maidan*, a big open stretch of yellowish turf, upon which goats were grazing tethered and a couple of vultures were bickering in an ungainly fashion over the carcase of a dead pariah dog. In time we reached the civil station, a collection of brown wooden bungalows with reddish shingled roofs, scattered here and there through the trees in which myriads of crows appeared to be settling, cawing incessantly, for the night. Above the nearer tree-tops the last rays of sunset lit up the pagodas on the ridge and made the gilt and glass-work on their vanes dazzling flame splashes.

There were one or two motor-cars about, but in the main, I could see, Mingin still clung to more primitive methods of locomotion. All the better-class population of the town were taking the air, for the most part in horse conveyances of one kind or another – Europeans (mostly young men in dog-carts like Wheeler's) and Anglo-Indians – the latter

GREEN SANDALS

very bewhiskered and prosperous looking, sitting motionless in their open carriages with their wives and daughters. Burman ponies abounded. I saw nothing in the way of horse-flesh much over thirteen hands. The white folk looked every bit as pasty as in Rangoon, and I began to realize what a lot in the way of 'washing out' two hundred inches of rain could do.

I had half expected to find it raining in Mingin, but it was just as hot and dry as on the other side of the gulf. It appeared that the monsoon would not break for another two months. 'And when it breaks, it breaks, I can tell you!' Wheeler assured me, peering out from under the rim of his sun hat. 'You'll need a *barsati* then, my boy!' he went on and waited eagerly for me to ask him what a *barsati* was, which I perversely declined to do, having happened to learn that it was a mackintosh.

He was in great form, was Wheeler. He seemed to know every one we passed on the road and presently gave his *topi* to the syce to hold to save him the trouble of removing it every time he passed a lady. He drove me to the Bairds' bungalow — a quite palatial edifice — teak built, with enormous airy rooms, full of carved furniture, opening into broad verandahs where maiden-hair fern and lilies stood in pots and long arm-chairs abounded. There seemed to be punkahs moving slowly overhead wherever one went.

Baird was a shrewd heavy Scotchman with thick black hair and a tooth-brush of a moustache to match. He looked as though he would have been

GREEN SANDALS

happier in his shirt-sleeves. He asked me what instructions Philipson had given me, interspersing occasional hoarse 'Ayes,' and then he sat silent for a space, nursing his tea-cup in both hands and looking hard at my feet. Even the punkah could not prevent beads of perspiration from standing on his forehead.

After awhile he raised his eyes a few inches and asked me if I had ever been in Dundee.

I said 'No.'

'Glasgow, then?' he inquired cautiously, as though there were still a glimmer of hope left, and on my again pleading guilty, he gloomed in silence with his lower jaw stuck out till I began to wonder whether he might not say I had to go back to Rangoon by the return steamer. Then his jaw went back. 'Ye've much to learrn, in that case,' he observed finally, and then, a moment later, with his mouth full and pointing with a strip of toast, he added, 'Ye're no better off than Wheeler, there!' After this outburst he seemed relieved when his wife took me off his hands and left him free to mop his forehead and watch me at his leisure.

Mrs. Baird was dark and double-chinned and pervading. I was intrigued by her big luscious eyes and her comfortable figure. She wore swinging black jet earrings that seemed part and parcel of her anatomy and, as they moved all the time she was speaking, they were seldom still. She was a notable Mingin figure, the leading member, Wheeler told me later, of that time-honoured order known locally as the 'Old Guard.' If there was anything about

GREEN SANDALS

the station or its inhabitants that Mrs. Baird did not know, that thing might, for all practical purposes, be dismissed as negligible. Her ancestors had been in occupation of the port for close on a century, having gained an economic footing there when Pegu was still a Burman province and Rangoon little more than a glorified fishing village, and she could remember the days when Mingin was able to put more tight-waisted European spinsters on to a ballroom floor than Rangoon itself. One quarter of the white or whitey-brown residents of the town was connected with her either by blood or marriage. She had relatives in the Police, the Customs, the local Bar and most of the business houses. She had been a Miss Sarkies, and at the moment had a niece of the same name living with her – Miss Blanche Sarkies, a plump brunette of a thing who belied her flaxen name and at whom Wheeler was pleased to cast devastating sheep's eyes.

After a visit to the club, a rather decrepit wooden building, where various drinks were consumed, Wheeler and I stopped and took pot-luck with the Bairds – pot-luck that ran into seven courses – and it was close on midnight when I arrived for the first time at Wheeler's chummery, to find an officious Madras with an unsteady eye already engaged for me. This fellow had already unpacked and disposed of my clothes and other effects, and it only remained for me to turn in, without further ado, under white mosquito curtains in a lofty bed-room with teak walls all round, feeling that life was being made very easy for me.

CHAPTER VIII

OF course it was not all beer and skittles working in Blackburns'. After dark the beer flowed and the skittles rattled festively down, but during the hours of daylight our noses were on the grindstone. We started work soon after dawn next morning. Wheeler shepherded me round the bazaar, showed me this and that, warned and counselled me, introduced me to a host of new acquaintances. It did not take me long to discover that Blackburns' were out and out the firm of pre-eminence in Mingin. They dealt in timber mainly, but also in paddy, owning two noisy rice mills on the foreshore a little way up the river. Piece goods, which were to be my special department, were really a side line, but I was to find Baird as knowledgeable a person in that quarter as he was (if Wheeler was to be believed) in the sphere of teak and rice. As to gunny bags, his knowledge was phenomenal. That was his Dundee training, of course. He was the supreme business man, with vision enough to picture the perfect mercantile house and single-minded enough to keep conflicting ideals from blurring the picture.

Wheeler soon found out all I knew about piece goods and I don't think he was much impressed. However, he spoke comfortable words. 'You'll soon tumble to it, my lad,' he said. It was clear that I had a probationary period before me and it was reassuring to learn that I could, even while grounding myself in my duties, do certain jobs which called less for technical experience than for

GREEN SANDALS

tact and discretion. Wheeler talked quite early in the day of one of those jobs – the kind of thing, he gave me to understand, that a new-comer could really do better than an old hand. It was what he called ‘smoothing down the wild Irishman.’

This individual, it appeared, was one of Blackburns’ competitors on the field of piece goods. ‘What you’ve got to do, my son,’ explained Wheeler, ‘is to make up to him and keep in with him, as though nothing had happened in the past. Quite easy for a chap who’s new to the place. . . . You’ll be knocking up against him, too, more than any of the rest of us. . . . Baird’s making a great point about it. . . . You’ve got to soothe him and cherish him. See?’ He used his little white hands as he spoke, smiling at the frank puzzlement of my face as I found this charge laid on me. ‘Why we should bother to make up to the chap now I can’t imagine,’ he went on. ‘He’s down and out – or will be precious soon. He can’t possibly hurt us. However, it’s the *burra sahib’s hukum*, and I tell you, Staynes, when the old man is set on a thing, it’s no earthly use trying to make out it can’t be done, so there you are!’

It struck me, as I watched him and his hands, that he was far better qualified for duties that involved smoothing and soothing than I was; however, I said nothing and almost immediately after this he nipped me by the elbow. ‘Come a yard or two this way,’ he said. ‘There he is! That lanky bloke out by the fish stalls with a big *topi* on. That’s the wild Irishman.’

GREEN SANDALS

I looked in the direction indicated and saw a tall European addressing a native trader from his full height. He had a bony jaw and a short nose and a long upper lip that looked unshaven. His sun-hat was very broad-brimmed and very shabby, and did not come far enough down behind to cover his thin neck, from which the collar of his frayed white jacket stood out, leaving a gap one could have thrust one's hand down easily. I could see why he was called the wild Irishman. He only needed knee breeches and green stockings to figure as the conventional old-fashioned fancy dress Hibernian. If one wanted the antithesis of Wheeler, the prim, the manicured, the self-sufficient, here one had it, in the man out by the fish stall. He might have been forty, but was possibly more. He was puffing in a worried way at a cheroot as he talked, from his great height, down to the native (a black-bearded tubby little fellow with a flat green velvet cap on his head), and even from where I stood I could see that his fingers were stained a dull yellow with constant nicotine. He was certainly not an attractive specimen and it was clear that smoothing him down would call for all the arts of diplomacy, and yet, as I stared at him, I felt drawn towards the man. He was straight, if crabbed. I could see he was very much in earnest, that he took life seriously, but I couldn't conceive him taking a mean advantage of anyone. I had never till then realized what an asset that was.

I turned to Wheeler. 'Do you want me to start making up to him straight off?' I asked with a laugh, being suddenly rather doubtful whether he

GREEN SANDALS

had been serious in what he said. He shook his head. 'Heaven forbid!' he exclaimed. 'Not a day earlier than you need!'

And with that he moved off and introduced me to one of Mrs. Baird's second cousins – a very upright little man, with replicas of Mrs. Baird's sloe-black eyes and with a drooping grey moustache – exactly the same colour as his felt helmet. Minus his name was. He was in the Customs, and before we had been ten minutes together he had sold me a pony.

In due course I made the wild Irishman's acquaintance. I was introduced to him at the club – I think it was the evening of the same day. It was his long Celtic upper lip that was alone responsible for his nickname. He was not Irish; he was pure English – from Sussex somewhere – and he told me he had never been west of Bristol. His name was Brendish and – by the queerest chance, considering I had been told off to make up to him – he happened to be a chess player. It appeared that for the moment he and I were the only two chess players in Mingin. He almost fell on my neck when he found I was keen on the game.

'You must come round and try conclusions with me one day,' he declared, blinking his little grey eyes and opening and shutting his letter-box of a mouth. And it was while – metaphorically speaking – his long lean arms were still round me that he suddenly discovered that I was in Blackburns'. The intimation discomfited him terribly. 'Timber or piece goods?' he inquired, pulling his bloodless lips

GREEN SANDALS

down between his finger and thumb, and when I said 'Piece goods' he seemed to relax, and drew away from me, scratching his jaw, with his eyes fixed on the punkah overhead.

'You don't say sol' he murmured at last, in such a voice that I looked upon our chess matches as doomed. However, the idea of a twin soul facing him across the squares was too much for him. He seemed ready to swallow even Blackburns' for the sake of a game, and presently he renewed his invitation, this time with some explicit reference to dates, and the thing was arranged.

I told Wheeler all about this afterwards and asked why the man had been so upset at my being in Blackburns'. We were having our *chota haziri* at the time – that wonderful meal, consumed in *négligé* during the one precious cool hour of daylight before the sun compels one to lower one's blue-lined *chicks*. Wheeler stretched a little striped silk pyjama leg and patted it. 'Good Lord! Don't you know?' he said. 'I thought I told you about it the other day. We've been fighting each other in the courts, he and we, for heaven only knows how long. Funny you haven't heard of it, for it was in all the papers. It was a case of infringement of a trade mark – the Dancing Girl, you know. You must have heard of it, or seen the mark, anyway! No? Well, he sued us in the first instance – a dog-in-the-mangerish thing to do – and he lost and then he appealed and they upset the lower court's decision and there have been all kinds of interlocutory orders and jim-jams growing out of it. You see we started the thing

GREEN SANDALS

in red instead of blue, and that wouldn't suit Brendish at all, drat him!

'The firm very nearly took it to the Privy Council – more, by the way, on principle than anything else, for, after all, there's no particular money in it now. Dancing Girl has been off the market for over a year and the Elephant is the brand that all the small traders are wild on; which just shows how fashions change in the unchanging East!

'Altogether it was an unfortunate business – for Brendish, any way. . . . Good Lord! We've got plenty behind us and can stand the racket, whereas he can't. He's in low water, the Irishman is. If he doesn't take care, he'll be in Queer Street before next cold weather . . . insolvent and what not! . . . Thinking he was going to collar the wolfram market!

'No, we don't bear him any ill-will. It's he that thinks we've got a *zid* against him. If our paths didn't cross it wouldn't matter a damn, but we've got to have dealings with him, and not with him only, but with people who have been all ready to take his side and don't want to see him put upon. They're really the blokes Baird's thinking of! . . . So that, you see, is why you've been told off to be nice to him. . . . Fancy your playing chess, now! I call it simply providential! Work the thing for all it's worth. Get him on to the Hastings Congress. He'll talk by the hour when once he's started.'

I certainly worked the chess for all it was worth. Brendish and I soon fell to playing regularly. I seem to recollect our meetings as somewhat deadly

GREEN SANDALS

encounters. We had a way of settling ourselves down to them after dark, in our shirt sleeves, for the most part without a punkah, as far as possible away from the lamp and its attendant swarm of insects, often with barely light enough to see the pieces. We never uttered a superfluous word after the opening move, but all the time Brendish used to grunt and shuffle with his feet and slap in an uncontrolled way at the mosquitoes and pull at his fingers till they cracked. It was impossible for him to do anything quietly. He was, nevertheless, a sagacious player and generally beat me.

He was married – not over happily, so people in Mingin said. Mrs. Brendish used to spend those chess evenings apart in the drawing-room, reading, and had usually gone to bed long before the end of the game was in sight. My first impression of her was of a dark, silent, heavy woman, who might, twenty years back, have been an upstanding, taking girl. Wheeler called her ‘morose,’ and no one could say she was a social success, for she kept a great deal to herself and appeared seldom at the club. She was not one of the ‘Old Guard’ and had not been taken into their fold. I believe I had been nearly six months in Mingin before I saw her by daylight.

She was quite civil to me in those early days, but with the kind of civility that is paid grudgingly to an emissary from the enemy’s camp. It was as though she suspected I was there for a purpose – sent, perhaps, to spy out the nakedness of the land – and when one considers the manner of my first

GREEN SANDALS

approach, one must give her credit for at least a dash of intuition. I confess that at first, when I was there, as it were, to order, there were moments when I felt almost guilty. Later on, however, when it was wholly for my private ends that I came, that feeling went.

It did not take me long to find out that Wheeler's account of Brendish's financial position was accurate enough. The Brendishes appeared to be living from hand to mouth. They kept only one pair of ponies, which drew their quavering old office *gharry* to and from the bazaar, but their house, though rather dilapidated, was a big one and highly rented and the compound must have needed a deal of tending. At times they entertained – rather feverishly and, to my mind, rather showily, Brendish declaiming in his husky tenor at one end of the table, Mrs. Brendish watching him from under her black eyebrows at the other, in an agony, I make no doubt, as to what the queer ungainly fellow was going to say next.

These dinners were what Wheeler would have called 'window dressing' pure and simple, indulged in to hide what I, as a *habitué* of the house, was bound to see daily – the shabby furniture, the frequent shortage of ice, the lack of sufficient people to pull the punkah.

I was soon to learn what Mingin's two hundred inches of rain looked and sounded and smelt like. I had not so much as adapted my system to the fires of March and April, when May, mangoes and the

GREEN SANDALS

monsoon were on us. The wet weather began with great noisy thunder showers which roared like a million kettle-drums on the corrugated iron roofs, ending a sweltering furnace period, leaving the world steaming and the new-washed leaves waving in a sticky sun-blaze. One welcomed these cooling downpours at first. One hung on their approach, in the guise of slate-grey cloud banks, for they put an end to hours of brazen torment, even though they left the atmosphere of a Turkish bath behind them. In time the showers grew more frequent, the intervals of sunshine rarer, and by the end of June moving white drifts took possession overhead and drenched incessantly. I got prickly heat and found myself shunning effort of the mildest kind. My ankles were aflame with irritation from the bites of the mosquitoes which, numerous enough before, were now immeasurably multiplied. I never felt dry clothes save when I slipped on something fresh from the brazier, when the smell of damp flannel was temporarily overcome by the sour fumes of charcoal.

For seven months that went on — drizzle and downpour and breathless grey interlude. One's boots — or so much of them as the cockroaches had left — went mildewed, disgustingly, all in a night; one's pith *topi* drooped away into a lifeless pulp; one's cigarettes turned limp and yellow. Green ferns sprouted on the masonry of brickwork pagodas, white fungus on wooden shingles. Frogs boomed at night-time in the ditches, insects swarmed everlastingly round the smoky oil lamps. And yet, for

GREEN SANDALS

all that, we lived and, in a manner, thrived, itching, fretful and white-faced, sweating under our rain-coats, below our umbrellas, driving to office and club in torrents, sloshing through pitted road puddles in search of exercise, even playing outdoor games between the rain-storms—football on a squashy *maidan* and occasionally, if the break was a long one, lawn tennis on laterite courts.

In September came hot sunny intervals between the downpours. The inundated paddy fields reflected green trees and yellow-brown huts and the intense watery blue of the sky. Mighty cloud banks—white by day, purple and champagne tinted at eventide—were piled on the horizon. Thunderstorms rattled up from the sea to bombard us and cool the air again. October and November passed; the squalls blew themselves out. Mangosteens went out; custard apples came in. The sun glared down upon us from a rain-washed heaven, there came the unwonted sight of dog-carts raising puffs of real dust on the roads, and every one began talking of the cold weather and of the new arrivals who were expected from England.

And, as the rains diminished, so, it seemed to me, did the fortunes of the Brendishes. Piece goods had a measly innings everywhere that year, and under Brendish's irresolute hands did more poorly than anywhere. Japan was threatening to cut the ground from under Manchester's feet. Brendish refused to recognize this fact and to adjust himself to the new conditions. It was common property in the bazaar, too, that the wild Irishman had made an appalling

GREEN SANDALS

mess of a wolfram concession he had been rash enough to handle.

'He'll go *fat* before Christmas or I'm a Dutchman!' was Wheeler's candid verdict one day as together we watched the long, awkward, worried man striding down Circular Road towards the bazaar with his long arms swinging. 'How he has managed to keep his head above water so long beats me,' he went on, taking his spectacles off to polish them. 'Does he ever mention his affairs to you, Staynes?'

'Why the deuce should he?' I demanded, staring hard back at him.

In point of fact, Brendish had never breathed a word about his dealings to me, but, even if he had, I was not going to pass anything on to Wheeler. If it was for the firm's sake that I had first cultivated the wild Irishman's acquaintance, it was solely for my own sake that I continued to frequent the house, and in the changed circumstances it would have been rank treachery to trade on my intimacy – a wrong to Brendish – to say nothing of his wife.

A strange woman, Mrs. Brendish – big, firm-mouthed, hawk-nosed, dark-haired, carrying about an air of wearied tolerance for my presence in the bungalow. As a rule her eyebrows were raised long-sufferingly, but when she was watching me (and after the first few weeks she seemed to be constantly doing so) they came down till her fine eyes were as good as hidden, as though the least flicker of her lids might be the cause of her missing some action on my part that should betray me. She observed my down-

GREEN SANDALS

sitting and my up-rising as a cat might the movements of a mouse. I believe her silence was largely due to the fact that she was afraid to trust herself to speak in my presence lest she should, by inadvertence, blurt out something that Blackburns' might catch hold of and turn to their own account.

CHAPTER IX

WHETHER all this watching satisfied her as to my good intentions I do not pretend to know. All I can say is that one evening she showed me a new, an unexpected side of herself – a side that I could not help thinking might have been hidden up till then for a purpose fore-ordained. I had come that evening for my usual game of chess, walking softly and unannounced into the hushed, half-darkened verandah of the bungalow, to find it, as I thought, empty. Then, as I stood irresolute, wondering whether to call David, the Madrasi boy, or not, I heard Mrs. Brendish's deep voice and was aware of a white figure almost hidden in the depths of an easy chair.

'Oswald's away, Mr. Staynes,' she called out, without moving. 'He has had to go to Rangoon for a day or two. He particularly told me to let you know chess would be off, and I particularly wouldn't. I was determined that you should come all the same. I wanted to have a chat with you. I've never had a chance till now.'

All this sounded wonderfully gracious, but somehow, there in the gloom, I felt a little alarmed. What did she want to talk to me about? Was she going to try and find out from me what Blackburns' thought about her husband's financial position? Was she even going to ask me to put in a good word for the poor fellow with my *burra sahib*? . . . I must admit that I sank a little uneasily into a chair beside her, for I knew there was nothing that I could do

GREEN SANDALS

to help. However, this nervousness soon gave place to quite different feelings. It was one of the first cold-weather days we had had and, now that the sun was down, there was a sense of freshness in the air that had an exhilarating stab in it. The moon was just rising, like the white globe of an oil lamp, behind the trees, and overhead the stars were coming out one by one. I felt all the blood in my veins stirring as I sat in the gloom close to her waiting for her to speak. I could not get over the feeling that she was taking advantage of her husband's absence to say something important – something she had been hoarding up. I hadn't the foggiest notion what it might be, but the hour and the place seemed gradually to hint at something that could not possibly be common or trivial, that might even be romantic. I was nothing if not impressionable in those days, and at the moment I was distinctly excited by the idea of an assignation so deliberately planned.

When, however, after a longish silence, she did speak, it was disappointing to find that she showed no signs of rising above the level of station gossip. The subject she chose to ply me with was merely Wheeler's engagement to Miss Sarkies, a social happening which had stirred Mingin to the depths a week before, and it rather nettled me to see that she thought I ought – if I were worth anything – to be a little broken-hearted about it. It was the recognized attitude for candid friends to take up towards the bachelors of the station every time one of our exceedingly rare spinsters was 'netted,' but I had imagined she was above that sort of thing. It

GREEN SANDALS

was not as though she treated it lightly, either. She seemed really concerned when I declared, with perhaps unnecessary insistence on the point, that I had no intention of being Wheeler's best man, and she leant rather pointedly to comfort.

'Well, it's in the firm, anyway!' she murmured in her rich consolatory voice. 'And there'll be plenty of fresh girls out this cold weather.'

I refused to admit that matrimony had any immediate attractions for me and, to show how little I was affected by Wheeler's conquest, I declared to my hostess that I would ten times rather be sitting talking to her than to the dusky Blanche. The remark was rather futile and pettish. It smacked of sour grapes. I brought it out partly because some polite insincerity of the kind seemed expected of me, but mainly because I wanted to hear what the sentiment would sound like, put, thus brazenly, into words, and, believe me, the moment it was out of my mouth I saw that, with all its sloppiness, it was no insincerity at all but absolutely and redeemingly true. She had hardly said anything so far, but already, in some inscrutable way, she had shown herself to be infinitely more absorbing a companion than Blanche Sarkies, or, indeed, for the matter of that, than any other soul in Mingin. She had a way with her — that dark silent woman — a way one didn't appreciate fully till she had elected for a moment to break a long silence.

At the same time she could be very exasperating — trying to keep her real self from me till she considered me worth knowing better. Even now she

GREEN SANDALS

seemed to regard me and Wheeler and Miss Sarkies and the girls who were to come out during the cold weather as irresponsible beings on a plane of extreme juvenility. 'Now that we've done with you children,' she appeared to be saying, 'let's get to the grown-ups,' and she began presently to talk about the new District Superintendent of Police, a man named Venne, in a way that was designed to show me that, although people weren't tumbling over each other to get a sight of her, she yet did see visitors in Mingin – visitors of moment – people who counted.

I had hardly got to know Venne. When I say that he was our new District Superintendent, I don't mean to imply that he was new to Burma or the police service. He was a sturdy, gruffish party with a grey moustache, who had a surly way with his juniors and was always grumbling that he had been sent down from the Chinese frontier to the dull end of the Province. He seemed to have no use for me. I certainly had very little for him, and I didn't want to hear Mrs. Brendish talking about him. I believe I rather amused her on this occasion by referring to him in the same terms as I might have referred to old Moggridge, the retired pleader, Mingin's oldest white resident. She had offered to play a little and was on her way towards the piano when my remark arrested her. She turned, with her hand on the piano cover, and for the first time in my life I heard that sad woman laugh – deep down and quite divinely.

'What are you calling Mr. Venne an "old buster"'

GREEN SANDALS

for?' she demanded. 'You'll be calling me an old buster next!'

'Heaven forbid!' I cried out, horrified at the sacrilege of it. 'Why, old Venne's over forty!' I declared, anxious to show that I was not in the least jealous.

I had hoped that my thinking forty very old would have amused her, for her laugh (now that she had, as it were, chosen to bring it out from its hiding and show it me) was something altogether rich and delightful. However, she did not even smile. Her eyebrows went up instead. 'How old do you think I am?' she said and, without waiting for an answer, she sat down and began to play softly and to make up for her raised eyebrows and everything.

It was a terrible old instrument, that piano. One could imagine bygone members of the Old Guard strumming upon it in the early days of Mingin when Mrs. Baird was being wheeled about the *maidan* in a perambulator by a Madrasi ayah, but before Mrs. Brendish had touched the keys a dozen times I had called myself a fool for having come night after night to the house in ignorance of the treat I might have had for the asking. She made the worn wires sing like a white-haired ex-prima donna giving a few old friends a treat. It was like a cool gust from the gulf on a torrid night in April. It only needed her laughter voice to accompany it to be quite perfect. It was wonderful! . . . I made her go on playing and lay back in my chair, beating time softly on the leg-rests. I stared up at the sky through the branches of the mango trees. I thought unutter-

GREEN SANDALS

able things. The notes that pealed out from under her white fingers and curled round my heart were like the stars overhead. Each quivering point of light aloft appeared to throb to its own particular chord. I wouldn't have changed places with Wheeler now for a lakh and I didn't mind if Mrs. Brendish knew.

At last she stopped to rest and I sat bolt upright in my chair. It was strange how, as the last phrase died away, my heart went back to where we had been when she began. 'Does Mr. Venne like your playing?' I asked. Somehow I couldn't keep away from the old fuss-stick.

She covered her eyes with her hands. She seemed quite worn out with her playing. 'He has never heard me play,' she said softly. 'You know he came to see me about business.'

'Police business!' I cried. 'Never!' I was suddenly indignant with the old fool for worrying her.

'About a woman in the compound,' she went on, still keeping her sheltering hands up. 'A Burman. . . . My cook's wife.'

'What! San Dun's?' I said. I had seen the cook, a thin, pock-marked rascal with a head-cloth always askew, and had more than once been asked to pronounce an opinion on his curry puffs and his snipe puddings.

'The same,' she said. 'Ma E. That's the woman's name.'

'Ah, you got Mr. Venne in, did you?' said I, trying to speak of him as though he had been a plumber.

GREEN SANDALS

'What's the matter with her? Has she been thieving?'

She shook her head. 'I didn't get him in,' she declared. 'He came to speak to me about her. It was about a month ago.' She suddenly brought her deep-fringed eyes to bear upon me, lifting her face from her hands. 'She's evidently a suspicious character,' she said. 'Do you know anything about her?'

'I?' I demanded. 'No. How should I know her?'

'You're a great deal in the bazaar,' she murmured, as though encouraging me to rack my memory. 'She sells there.'

'There are stacks of women selling in the bazaar,' I returned. 'They squat there by the dozen. I dare say I know the lady by sight, though. What do you mean by a suspicious character?'

On this point, however, she seemed designedly vague, and presently she started playing again.

It was late before I got away that night, dimly aware that I had entered upon a strange new phase in my relations with the Brendishes. I remember that when at last I left the house, overwrought with melody and seeing visions of the kind that young men see, she tried to bring me to earth again. We didn't often shake hands in Mingin, but on this occasion she took my hand at going and looked me up and down with a searching smile.

'I'm old enough to be your mother,' she declared, just as though she had been saving it up for half the evening to bring out now.

I did not particularly mind being brought to earth again. It only made me realize how high I

GREEN SANDALS

had been soaring. I laughed as I pressed her hand. 'Oh, nonsense!' I exclaimed. 'I'm a good deal older than you think. My mother's well over fifty. Do you know I'm an uncle!'

I left her smiling tragically. I knew she was joking. I don't suppose there was really much more than ten years between her and me.

I came back often to the bungalow after that, but things were different then. It wasn't only that there was a new Mrs. Brendish there to greet me; my games with the wild Irishman had ceased. A new chess star had appeared in the firmament – a little Scotch engineer, with a spotty white face and sandy hair, from one of the saw-mills. Brendish measured swords with this champion once, was badly routed, and thereafter thirsted for the victor's blood to such good purpose that Mrs. Brendish had to apologize to me day after day.

'Oswald's playing over at Mr. McCutcheon's,' she used to cry out to me from the far end of the verandah. 'I can't get the man to stop at home.'

'Why *should* he stop at home?' I used to reply – also day after day, and as a rule I added sportively that it was her bounden duty to make up to me for Oswald's base defection. From which it may be gathered that, though I continued my visits to the Brendishes' bungalow, it was not for chess that I went. Let that suffice!

Mingin was not really a big station. For purposes of gossip it was almost incredibly small. Everybody knew everybody else. No one ever seemed to be out of whispering distance of his

GREEN SANDALS

neighbours. I know that my goings and comings and stayings were not unnoticed, but the only significant feature of the new order of things was the fact that Wheeler, who, up till then, had been wont to rally me on the devotion with which I was carrying out the firm's instructions, suddenly ceased his gibes and made as though he were quite unaware where I spent my evenings.

CHAPTER X

IT was about Christmas time when it became finally and fatally clear that Brendish was nearing the end of his tether and must go under unless some good Samaritan stepped in. That wolfram business had practically finished him off. For some time rumour had been whispering behind its hand in the bazaar that the Samaritan was not going to appear on the scene, with his wine and his oil and—above all—with his twopence, but it was not till Baird opened his mouth that I was sure on this point.

Baird never wasted good breath on us *chokras* in the office unless there were some definite instructions to give. Sometime late in January he sent for me. I went into his sanctum, the coolest room in the office, where he sat under a low slow punkah that almost ruffled his black shock of hair. His jacket was off, his thumbs were hooked aggressively under his braces. I could see drops twinkling among the hairs on the backs of his fingers as he drummed them on his damp chest.

'Have ye been enjoyin' yer chess, Mr. Staynes?' he inquired, and freed a hand to turn the stout black cheroot he was chewing.

I gave a little laugh. 'Chess!' I echoed a little bitterly. 'I haven't touched a piece for weeks,' and as he nodded, evidently a little surprised to hear this, I went on: 'Brendish flies for higher game than me! It's McCutcheon he's trying to down now.'

'Ye'll have better things to play there than chess,

GREEN SANDALS

maybel' he observed, bracing himself significantly. Then before I could ask him – a little hotly – what better things he meant, he went on, dwelling on every word:

'It's not many more games of chess he'll be playing now with Jock McCutcheon, I'm thinking,' said he. 'Have ye heard – ?' He gazed at me with canny deliberation as though he were debating the wisdom of trusting a junior with news that might not be common property for twenty-four hours. 'Have ye heard that that Chetty fellow, Allagappa, has got a decree against him, aye, and has applied for execution? . . . Ye haven't heard? Well, he has. . . . Execution! . . . A dirty business!'

He puffed for awhile in silence at his cheroot. Then he began again. 'The Chetties!' he muttered. 'Did ye ever hear such madness? The fule must have been just daft to have gone to them! . . . Fifty thousand and costs! . . . And him just living from hand to mouth! . . . Who's to help him, I ask ye? Who does he think will, eh?' (He looked at me as though I ought to have been able to say.) 'Are we to cut our own throats? . . . Him and his Dancing Girl!' (I had never realized how the thing rankled still till I heard him speak.) 'No, I think not, Mr. Staynes! Who's to bolster him up then, eh?'

He uttered the last words as though he were merely repeating a question I had just asked him. 'Who else?' he went on. 'No one in Mingin, I tell ye. Cleghornes wouldn't look at it, nor Aratoons either. He'll have to go! He'll have to go! . . . See here, Mr. Staynes, ye're a friend of his. I'm

GREEN SANDALS

thinking ye might do worse than let him know — Nicely, ye know. . . . Ye see what I mean.'

He pulled his cheroot from under his moustache and gazed long and speechlessly at the butt, then, with a single meaning grunt, he replaced it between his teeth and took up his pen without a glance in my direction. I saw I was not further needed. I went out.

I did not need to be told what he meant. To be informed by Baird that I might 'do worse' than let Brendish know definitely that he need expect no help from Blackburns' was to be presented with a veiled imperative. It was a detestable thing for me to have to do. Detestable, and quite unnecessary, too, for if anything was certain it was that poor proud Brendish would sooner go through hell fire than stoop to ask a favour of his old enemies. Still, there were my orders, and I reflected that if he was to be told, it was important that he should be told before it was too late for him to make what use he could of the knowledge; and so I made my usual pilgrimage to the Brendishes' bungalow that same evening soon after dark and was not a little relieved to find that Brendish was not at home.

No more, for the matter of that, was Mrs. Brendish, but Mrs. Brendish was always worth waiting for, and presently she came in, in her best clothes, showing how extraordinarily handsome she could look if she took the trouble. She had been at some afternoon entertainment at the club and the unwonted gaiety had brightened her sombreness up. It seemed a shame to have to worry her about financial matters,

GREEN SANDALS

but my message burned within me, and it suddenly occurred to me that I might be able to convey it to her husband through her.

I got on to the subject as soon as I could. 'I hear those Chetties have been suing your husband,' I said.

'Ah, yes, there's a case on, isn't there?' she returned lightly, exactly as though it had been a matter of a measly Small Cause Court suit for fifty rupees.

'It may mean a pull on your resources,' I observed with appropriate gloom.

'Oh, no doubt,' she agreed; but she was clearly thinking of something else than Brendish's indebtedness.

'I hope it doesn't mean that you'll have to leave Mingin!' I exclaimed disconsolately. That, when I came to look at it, was the aspect of the matter that seemed to affect me most nearly.

And all she said in reply, peering hard and dubiously at her finger-nails, was 'Well, of course, it may have to come to that.'

She was plainly so unwilling to pursue the subject that I promptly changed my mind about using her as a medium for the conveyance of Baird's message. I determined, if possible, to tackle Brendish himself later. Mrs. Brendish and I were soon off on other topics. So far as I remember, we talked about her cook's wife, to whom she had referred on a previous occasion, and she showed me some stuff the woman had fetched for Brendish from the bazaar — some white stuff in paper which I first thought was cocaine, but was actually beetle poison or butterfly bane or something of that kind. Very soon, however,

GREEN SANDALS

learning that Brendish would be home before long and thinking to have a word with him alone on the road outside, I left – rather earlier than I should otherwise have done.

I had reckoned on meeting the wild Irishman somewhere near the *maidan* on his way back from McCutcheon's. As a matter of fact I descried his long, pale, scarecrow of a figure swaying against the blackness of the roadside trees not more than a couple of hundred yards from his house.

I think he would have been glad to take advantage of the gloom to shamble past me without a word, but I would take no denial. The moon was behind him and in its light he towered crooked and ungainly. He was bare-headed. His hat was in his hand. His big ears stuck out from his scraggy neck and every wrinkle in his ill-fitting jacket showed distinctly. Somehow I had expected that this man, faced by the prospect of ruin, would have been more than usually moody and distraught, but, oddly enough, the glimpse he gave me of himself, every fold of him fantastically picked out by the moonbeams, was of one at peace with the world. When he spoke, his voice had none of the shaky fretfulness I had been prepared to hear.

'How are you, Brendish?' I called out. 'I have just been in to see your wife.'

'Ah!' he said, and, just as I expected him (why, I really cannot say) to make some comment on the frequency of my visits to the house, his face seemed to brighten. 'Staynes!' he announced impressively, 'I've just beaten McCutcheon!' He put his head on

GREEN SANDALS

one side to see how I was going to take this intimation and, as I took it in a grim pre-occupied silence, a moment later he went on: 'It's what I've always wanted to do, you know,' he told me. 'I was determined to whop him just once before — well, once, anyway. Astounding, it was! It isn't often one catches Jock napping, is it? And yet to-day I cornered him fairly. You'll hardly believe it, but there was a knight of mine fairly staring him in the face and he must needs —'

He would have been ready to ramble on for hours about moves and countermoves, but I was burning to get my message delivered and go away from him, so I cut him short.

'I say, Brendish,' I began. 'They tell me that that Chetty chap, Allagappa —'

It became his turn to interrupt me. 'Ah, yes,' he broke in quickly, with the whites of his eyes turned skyward. 'For Heaven's sake don't let's talk about that *now*!'

He was so urgent that at once I found myself murmuring 'All right. All right. I don't want to bother you about it if you had rather not.'

He drew himself up to his full height and looked down at me, hugging his arms tightly. 'No bother, my dear chap,' he assured me. 'It isn't, perhaps, quite so bad as it seems,' he went on with an optimism that I felt sure couldn't last.

'You believe you can get round Allagappa?' I inquired, thinking mainly of the blank in my life that Mrs. Brendish's departure from Mingin would create.

GREEN SANDALS

'Oh, I can get round him – in a sort of way,' he returned with kind of placid vagueness.

'It would be great if you could!' I assured him heartily, and then, my mission recurring to me, I added, 'And off your own bat, eh? I mean, without help from any of the firms?'

He seemed, with his arms crossed, to be hugging his chess victory and his plans for getting round Allagappa tighter to himself than ever. 'Oh, certainly off my own bat, if it ever comes to it,' he declared with finality. Then he took up fresh ground. 'Look here, Staynes,' he said. 'So you've been with my wife. She's back from the club, then?'

'Not very long,' said I. 'She tells me she had quite a good time. She looks all the better for it.'

'Ah, then you weren't at the dance yourself, I suppose,' he observed. 'Well, I hope she hasn't overdone it. She's not used to these junketings. Still . . . now and then. . . . Well, well, I must hurry up and tell her about the chess. It's getting late. Good night.'

He clapped his hat on his head and began to set his long legs in motion. He had got a step or two nearer home when he halted and, turning towards me, murmured, almost as though he had discovered it for the first time, 'You've been a good friend to my wife, Staynes, a very good friend. Upon my word, I don't know what she would have done without you!'

I was quite taken aback, having so often wondered whether I might not one day hear him expressing himself in a vastly different sense. 'I'm sure she

GREEN SANDALS

has been a very good friend to me!' I stammered.

'I'm very glad. I'm very glad,' he returned. 'Keep on being kind to her, Staynes. She values your friendship no end. Keep on being kind to her.'

With that he strode on again, with the moonlight now full on his back, snapping his fingers and swinging his arms. I stared after him, marvelling that a trumpety success at chess should be able thus to dissipate (even for an hour or so) a plagued man's worries. I felt pretty sure now that even if I had given him Baird's message, he would not, in his hour of victory, have been moved by it a whit.

Thinking the matter over as I walked home, with the *padauk* leaves whispering in the gulf breeze overhead, it occurred to me that the Brendishes must have made up their minds to take the first opportunity of quitting Mingin for good and all.

And yet Brendish's last words, which seemed to hover on the night wind, didn't quite square with the idea of Mrs. Brendish's early departure. How could I 'keep on' being kind to her if she was to be leaving the place directly? . . . I wondered, I recollect, whether Brendish by any chance might not have conceived the plan of quitting Mingin alone.

CHAPTER XI

I DID not see Mrs. Brendish for several days after this. But I saw Ma E, her cook's wife, who I gathered from words that had been let drop was not in her mistress's good graces. I had identified the woman in the bazaar. She sold goods there, looking over the tops of her knees at one from where she squatted on her raised bamboo stall – an inscrutable little minx with a disarming smile, tricked out in a clean white jacket and a spotless *tamein*, and usually with a flower in her tightly coiled black hair. She was always out to kill. Her company manners brought her plenty of custom. She dealt in cheroots for the most part but also in betel nuts and cloves and lime. She also kept odd kinds of medicaments and cosmetics in a red lacquer betel box at the back of her shop and would display them on occasions to a favoured few – scent in funny little bottles, *thanakka* powder for smearing on the face, and other queerly smelling drugs and stimulants of a vague and, quite possibly, disreputable sort. I bought some patent headache cure from her once in a foreign-looking phial. I have a shrewd suspicion that if I had happened to want cocaine I should have only had to mutter a word or two to this sleek accommodating female to have been served with a little on the sly. If this were really so, it would account for the fact that – as Mrs. Brendish had told me – the police were keeping their eye on the woman. These dubious wares were, however, a side line, like Blackburns' piece-goods. She rolled her cheroots herself and

GREEN SANDALS

very good ones they were. Brendish swore by them. Her husband, San Dun, never came near her in the bazaar, though he was often there, marketing for his mistress. I have seen him pass within a foot of his wife without a sign of recognition. I have my doubts whether he approved of her back-door trafficking.

I only spoke to Ma E once outside the limits of the bazaar.

I had been more than six months in Mingin before I saw a *pwe* or Burmese dramatic show, though I had often, of hot nights, heard the din of local entertainments far away in the distance of the native quarter. One evening, well on in the cold weather, after dinner at the chummery, while we were sitting yawning over cheroots and coffee in the verandah, Wheeler suggested our going down to patronize a show that was making night hideous with the clash of its band not so very far from the wooded skirts of the civil station. Having got me out of my easy chair, he was all for calling at the Bairds' on the way and taking Miss Sarkies with us; however, I prevailed on him to omit ladies from our party, and he and I made our way on foot through the spicy darkness, guided by the blare of the music and – as we drew closer – by a festive flare out by the edge of the *maidan*.

We found things in full swing in the low mat and thatch erection that had been run up on the sward not far from Boundary Road. The orchestral thunder, waxing in body as we drew near, had led us to expect a considerable gathering, but, as a matter of fact, there was not much of a crowd. Outside the

GREEN SANDALS

shed, in the light of feeble oil lamps, they were selling aerated waters and sweetmeats. Here men stood lounging and chattering – mostly natives of India, the shifty riff-raff of the bazaar. Inside the booth a small but enthusiastic crowd of Burmans were squatting on the bare ground or on mats, and, peering in over their black heads, we could see a hazy yellow radiance in the midst of which gaudy figures pranced and postured.

We pushed our way into the shed, to find ourselves the only Europeans there. At the instance of one of Blackburns' Burman clerks, who happened to be in the audience, some one fetched us a couple of cane-bottomed chairs to sit on. All around us crouched a hot mass of brown humanity, smoking, chattering and guffawing. Perched thus aloft, we were at a higher level than all the assembled company except the actual occupants of the stage, a mat-strewn circle in the centre of the building. We were well above the orchestra which, seated on the ground, had been thundering an ear-splitting measure as we edged through the press towards our seats. The flageolets squealed, youths kept time with primitive bamboo clappers, cymbals clashed deafeningly. There was a whole circle of drums round one of the musicians who, naked to the waist, twisted his shining body this way and that so as to belabour each of them in turn.

At first hearing there was no discernible method in all this madness of uproar, where each performer seemed to be bent only on extracting the maximum of noise from his own particular instrument; but

GREEN SANDALS

through the din an elfin, rollicking measure ran, and somehow cymbal and pipe and drum all managed to reach the final clashing chords together. Then, with the noisier instruments silenced, there would come a plaintive wandering tootle on the clarinet and a nasal falsetto would join in. And all the time those garish figures, upright on the mats, would keep on jigging in the lamplight. There was a bold-faced jade – all flimsy silk and tawdry spangles – wearing an amazing jacket with scalloped edges and a pink hobble skirt – and two men in skimpy loin-cloths who mimicked the girl's movements or engaged each other in quick dialogue of the ordinary music-hall type.

I could understand nothing of what was being said on the stage. Here and there a dubious gesture hinted at some impropriety or other, and every now and then a sheer yell of delight that went up from the audience told me that a verbal shaft had gone home. As thus – specially translated for my benefit by Blackburns' Burman clerk: 'Hey! Ko Myat, what are you doing now?' . . . 'Oh, I've got a high appointment, my lad.' . . . 'A high appointment, eh? What? Higher than a police sergeant?' . . . 'I should think so. Higher than the Deputy Commissioner.' . . . 'You don't say so!' . . . 'I do, indeed. Why, higher even than the Commissioner!' . . . 'Gracious! What *is* your job?' . . . 'Earth-oiling the roof of the Court-house!'

The clowns were like any couple of breezy town-bred Burmans one might encounter in the bazaar – one stout, loose-lipped and husky, leaning forward a

GREEN SANDALS

good deal, with his body bent, resting his hands on his knees – the other ferret-faced and leering, but the woman was something altogether different from any female one might expect to come across outside the glare of the footlights. I watched her curiously as she trod the mats in her extravagant pink and white costume, which they told me was modelled on the court dress of the Burmese kings. She shuffled, crab-wise, hither and thither on her imprisoned feet, which at each step she threw outwards and upwards. She writhed, she swayed, her knees and elbows were at all angles, her fingers were curved backwards from her open palms; she seemed to have no joints in her body. Her face was thickly powdered with yellow *thanakka*. She held her head back, her face was directed upwards, her eyes were half closed, her face, save for a stony simper, quite expressionless. Then suddenly, the thin brown lips would expand and the cream-coloured mask would be split horizontally by a spread of big white ogling teeth, which parted, to exhibit a cavernous mouth and throbbing red tongue, and out of this rent a breathless strangled staccato wail would issue, rising and falling, brought up short, starting again with a gasp and tailing off into a nasal drone like the expiring squeal of a bag-pipe.

It was a barbaric and not particularly edifying spectacle, and I was devoutly glad we had not brought Miss Sarkies with us. The scene altered from time to time. It had come to the turn of a painted, effeminate prince with jade ear-studs and a tight yellow head-cloth, who sat and toyed with a cheroot and harangued a crowd of abjectly crouching

GREEN SANDALS

courtiers, and I suddenly felt bored. I could understand none of the dialogue. The jokes were lost on me and I was consumed with a desire to go home. I looked yawning round at Wheeler.

'Let's get out of this,' said I.

'Wait a bit,' he urged. 'That girl will be back presently. Mind you, this goes on all night and the hottest stuff doesn't come till quite late.' However, he finally allowed himself to be conducted from his chair through the crowd, which drew aside on its haunches for a moment to let us pass and then turned back, absorbed, to the preposterous spectacle.

It was comparatively cool outside the theatre and I was glad to draw in breath after breath of fresh air on the grass of the *maidan*. The loafers still congregated in the neighbourhood of the playing booth and in the sickly lamp flare that illuminated the pink and yellow bottles of the lemonade stall I descried an acquaintance – Ma E – thoroughly at home in this concourse of night-birds. She was accompanied by a man – not her husband, but a stout, bull-necked, beetle-browed Mussulman – a Punjabi, I should think – with a black pointed beard, wearing a loin-cloth and a white waistcoat with crescent shaped embroidery where the pockets should have been.

This fellow salaamed sulkily as Wheeler greeted his companion in Hindustani, which it appeared she spoke quite passably. Ma E answered pertly, holding the end of her scarf to the corner of her mouth and making full use of her black eyes. I had never seen Wheeler in the least familiar before with this hussy in whom the police took such an interest, but

GREEN SANDALS

at the moment the thing was not in the least surprising. The atmosphere of noisy lamp-lit dissipation tended to breed a feeling of licence and irresponsibility, so much so that I myself was on a sudden moved to accost this slippery drug-seller as I passed. She had a smattering of English as well as Hindustani at her command, and so I called out, 'How are you, Ma E? How's business?' while I held out my cigarette-case towards her.

She took out a cigarette and made play with it between her brown fingers. 'Making plenty business,' she returned with a saucy giggle. 'See, if the *shakin* want anything, come to my place.' After which she added something over and above in Hindustani which I could not catch but which made the bearded Mussulman change his scowl momentarily into a moody grin.

Now that she was there smirking before me, I was reminded of the last time I had seen the woman — a few days before, in Brendish's verandah. 'What's that stuff you've been getting for Mr. Brendish?' I asked her.

'Mr. Brendish? . . . Getting?' she echoed blankly, evidently at a loss.

'Yes,' I cried, using my hands. 'In paper. . . . White stuff . . . medicine . . . like that! . . . Putting on the table. . . . Not good stuff, that, eh?'

She took me now. 'No. No good stuff, that,' she agreed, wrinkling her nose as though there were a nasty smell beneath it.

'Was it for his butterflies?' I inquired; but the word 'butterflies' was something altogether outside

GREEN SANDALS

Ma E's highly specialized vocabulary. '*Batapalaik!*' she repeated, somewhat blankly, and then she went on, as though to remove a misapprehension, 'Not Mr. Brendish!' she assured me. 'Mrs. Brendish. She tell me to bring that medicine.'

'Mrs. Brendish?' I exclaimed incredulously, and she nodded at me over the corner of her scarf. Next moment Wheeler had me by the arm and we had passed away from her into the darkness.

It struck me almost as soon as the words were out of my mouth, that I had been a fool to be familiar with the woman in these questionable surroundings. I saw in a moment how easily my advance might be misinterpreted and presumed on. Moreover, in the restraining gloom and hush of our homeward way, with the dissipated clash and bray growing fainter and fainter through the trees behind us, it felt like an act of gross disloyalty to Mrs. Brendish to have hobbled like that with the woman she seemed to dislike so much. Something in the way in which she had said (quite untruthfully, I believed) that Mrs. Brendish had told her to bring the white stuff, made me suspect that the enmity was reciprocal.

CHAPTER XII

IT was a week or two after this, I think, that Baird spoke to me a second time about Brendish and his affairs. I had been in to get his orders about some routine matter and, just as I was leaving, he detained me with an upward jerk of his pen.

'Have ye seen Brendish since I spoke to ye the other day?' he inquired.

'Only for a minute or two,' said I.

He was busy signing papers for the English mail at the moment — never missing a point in what lay before him, scratching a word in crisply here and there, shaking his head at this, nodding at that. 'M-m-m. . . . Did ye now!' he grunted behind his moustache at my reply, and there was silence for a space while he continued to run his lynx eye testingly over the correspondence. At last, without looking up, he spoke again.

'Then ye'll not have spoken to him about it yet,' he surmised.

'About the Chetty's business?' I said. 'Why, yes. I spoke to him about it, but he didn't seem anxious to discuss it.'

'Small wonder too!' observed the *burra sahib*.

'He talked as though he didn't need help from anyone,' I went on. 'He quite choked me off.'

'Ah, he choked ye off, did he?' Baird was rather amused. He sucked his fat cheeks in and made play with his nib. 'Well, ye can have another try at the chap on Friday evening, if ye like,' said he. 'Ye'll come and dine with us, see. We're making it eight-

GREEN SANDALS

thirty. We've asked him and his *mem sahib*, Mrs. Baird has.' He scratched for a while without speaking, then mused aloud. 'Dinner!' I heard him murmur. 'It's a good hot meal he'll be needing before the year's out. . . . Him and his Dancing Girl!'

Then, with his eyes still on the type-written page before him, 'By the same token, have ye seen his other dancing girl, Mr. Staynes?' he asked.

'His other dancing girl?' I echoed.

'Aye, a wee body from the bazaar,' he returned. 'Sits there and sells what nobody knows, they say.' Before I could answer he was deep in his papers again, apparently oblivious of my presence. When he looked up again he seemed almost surprised to see me still there.

'What'll be the total of elephants working up at Bodaw?' he asked. 'Send Mr. Wheeler to me, will ye, with the lists.' And I heard him mutter to himself as I left the room, 'Choked him off, did he?'

He seemed, when I saw him next, to be still murmuring the same words amusedly behind his moustache, that black barrier one could imagine him to have grown with the perverse intent of being able to keep all his good sayings to himself. He was standing, perspiring slowly, under the big punkah in his big teak drawing-room on the Friday evening, waiting for his dinner guests. There were plenty of these latter – nearly half the station, I should think. Nominally it was a dinner in honour of the new Commissioner, a shy, dry, elderly man – actually I

GREEN SANDALS

shall always believe that Mingin had been called in to take note of Brendish's presence at the board, to learn that Blackburns', that great-hearted firm, were not going to hit a man when he was down. They weren't going to prop their old adversary up financially – what would have been the good? – but they were willing to soften his fall with at least one fluffy social pillow. It wasn't as though they were to benefit by his downfall. His business had long been a negligible quantity, not worth stretching out a hand for. All the Bairds needed, I take it, was his humble defeated presence after long years at the victors' table.

If his presence in the flesh were really what they needed, they were doomed to disappointment. Mrs. Brendish arrived, big and handsome and bare-armed, with her hair, which at home was apt to stray rebelliously over her broad forehead, tamed into an exquisite subjection; but she came alone – without her husband. He evidently had not had the courage to put in an appearance.

I doubt whether, apart from the Bairds and Wheeler, anyone noticed the poor fellow's absence. Indeed, how should they, when his wife was there to fill the stage. She did more than double duty. She was splendid, she was immense! I recalled, as I gaped at her, one of her former sayings with stupefaction: 'Old enough to be my mother'! . . . It was ridiculous! She didn't look a day over eight-and-twenty, which was only six years older than myself! I don't know what the other ladies thought of her dress, what technical holes they could pick in it, but

GREEN SANDALS

I do assure you that it set her off to distraction. Its gleaming black transfigured her arms and neck. I could have sworn that through all those months of retirement she had presented an undistinguished – an almost dowdy – front to me and the world to the sole end that she should knock us the flatter on this supreme occasion. It was her old way of saving things up!

To my delight they put me, duly flattened, next her at table. It was Baird who took her in to dinner. And, when one came to think of it, it would have been an insult to treat anyone else as the *burra mem* of the evening. She had to turn her face mostly in her host's direction, so as not to miss any conversational morsel he might drop from those busy jaws of his. I can guarantee that there were not many of these! Miss Sarkies was on the other side of me and, as she had been assigned to Wheeler, the conqueror of hearts, who sat just beyond her, I had to languish for the most part silent, glad of anything that Mrs. Brendish might bestow upon me in her off time, hoping for more hereafter when the night was a little older.

She gave me more – a good deal more – later, but that wasn't till dinner was over and the guests were dispersing. She was the first to go, taking all the distinction and soul of the gathering with her. We streamed after her down the steps. Below, in the verandah, she offered me a lift home in her office *gharry*, for which a way had to be found through the array of more pretentious equipages in front of it. Still throbbing, as I was, at the revelation she had

GREEN SANDALS

vouchsafed me, I hated to see this resplendent being immured in a ramshackle old shandrydan like that, with its blistered venetians and its down-at-heel ponies. She ought, I felt, in fit keeping, to have rolled off in a shining barouche, with scarlet *chuprassies* hanging on behind.

I could see Wheeler eyeing the venerable conveyance with supercilious amusement, and the sight of his pale eyebrows sent the blood surging to my head. I wanted to show him I did not mind being seen at her side in that four-wheeled ruin, and I stepped in rather defiantly after her, while Wheeler's smooth little hands, projecting from his white cuffs and held appealingly outwards, appeared to be inquiring of the other guests, 'Now then! What did I tell you?'

Nothing that Wheeler had looked escaped Mrs. Brendish. She seemed to imagine I might be affected by what other people thought about our driving off together. I tried to laugh the thing away – making, I fear, a hopelessly sloppy business of it. She, at any rate, did not mind on her own account. In fact that night she seemed to rise superior to all minding of *that* kind. I felt sure she would have taken almost anything from me. I found her face close to mine – her white shoulders and neck – and the close intimacy of it all, in that narrow joggling conveyance that nearly threw us into each other's arms, thrilled me to the marrow.

I had long known that she was unhappy with Brendish, that he was not worthy of her, did not understand her in the least, but I felt it would be the depth of meanness for me to take advantage of that.

GREEN SANDALS

In fact I tried then and there to say what I could for her husband. I told her what he had said to me under the mango trees in the moonlight, how he had gone out of his way to ask me to be kind to her. It wasn't till I had spoken and seen how the thing affected her that it occurred to me that Brendish might on that occasion have been speaking sarcastically, for hadn't I, in all conscience, been more than kind to his wife already? I felt sure on this point a little later, when she began to speak about provocation – provocation from her husband. I couldn't think what provocation she could have been meaning if it wasn't that satirical request of Brendish's that I had quoted to her.

And then and there, on the seat opposite me, almost touching me, she began to speak of trouble ahead, as though some tragedy that had been threatening had suddenly come closer. The strain of the evening had begun to tell upon her and for a few moments she was quite unnerved. Just for a second I imagined it was her financial worries that were upsetting her (as well they might!) but soon I saw that the cause was totally different. She made that clear when I spoke about Allagappa. In fact, the impression she left me with as we neared the house was that the trouble concerned her own relations with her husband – that a domestic crisis had been reached.

The *gharry* drove up under the porch of the Brendishes' bungalow and we both stepped out on to the verandah. By rights she should have dropped me at the corner of the road and left me to walk the

GREEN SANDALS

rest of my way home, but for the life of me I couldn't tear myself away from her while her present distressful fit was on her.

Then, as we were standing alone together near the steps she spoke a second time about provocation and gave me a turn by suddenly pointing like a tragedy queen towards one end of the verandah, where I could see some green sandals lying. At first I was completely at sea. My first stupid fancy was that these were some of the servants' sandals and that Brendish had provoked her by encouraging these slovenly habits. Then I looked again – and words that Baird had let fall a few days earlier came back to me. Who was the 'wee body from the bazaar' he had spoken of, sitting there (the old rascal!) under the office punkah? There was just the one pair of sandals – a Burmese woman's pair, and when Mrs. Brendish kicked them fiercely into the compound, a light began to dawn and in it I saw provocation of a vastly different kind.

It was early days for guessing then, and I could only fumble with vague surmise. At the moment it seemed literally unthinkable that Brendish – that shy, awkward, elderly fellow – should have been carrying on an impudent intrigue with a common bazaar woman. I don't know that this unexpected turn of affairs did more for me at the moment than make me feel that it had become impossible for me to leave Mrs. Brendish as she was, alone in the house. If anything was going to happen, I should be a cur to refuse to see her through. One thing was obvious. She did not want me to go – at any rate not for the

GREEN SANDALS

moment. I could see she was finding excuses for me to stay and I felt bound to fall in with her wishes. The thought that I might be of help to her was like heady wine to me. Apart from everything else, too, she was much too interesting to leave. Something told me that to-morrow she would be her old, repressed, unattainable self again. It could never a second time be the same as now.

I hardly know what at this moving moment we said or did. I do remember, however, her leaving me to go upstairs. What she was going for I could not guess, but she told me she was coming back directly and I felt it was my business to mount guard below in case she needed me above. I recollect the sound of her footsteps as she went up the coco-nut matting on the stairs and how I wondered whether I ought not to offer to go up with her and how I finally settled not to.

She was upstairs some little time. She seemed to be going from room to room very softly, but she appeared to have found nobody in any of the rooms. That did not trouble me. It suited my book better that she should not find anybody. All was so quiet up above that presently I relaxed, thinking that the whole thing had been a false alarm, and helped myself to a whisky-and-soda and settled down in a long arm-chair to wait for her return.

And, as I sat there, brooding excitedly, there came a sound from the upper storey as of a quick movement and of a little strangled cry that hung for several seconds reverberating on the hot night air. It appeared to come from where Mrs. Brendish was.

GREEN SANDALS

I sat up in my chair. I strained my ears. But I heard nothing more. All was still again, so still that I could hear the trumpeting of the mosquitoes, and while I was debating in my mind whether or not to go up to see what was the matter I heard soft footsteps on the stairs and, turning, saw Mrs. Brendish coming down.

I was glad to see her and yet, at the sight of her, I had a sense of vague disquiet. There was something strange about her as she came. It is odd how one's mind works, but, looking at her as she descended, I was reminded, in a haunting, spectral way, of the sleep-walking scene in *Macbeth*. I half expected to see this dark woman carrying a taper in her hand, looking at something on her fingers. She came with a shroud of mystery about her, hinting at some dreadful deed done. The feeling was in the air. It seemed to dominate all the latter half of that extraordinary night.

CHAPTER XIII

I WAS on my feet long before she was level with my chair. 'All right upstairs?' I inquired, conscious that I was rather vague as to what would have constituted 'right' and what 'wrong' but mindful that she had, with the finger of premonition on her, spoken of trouble ahead.

She did not reply for a moment and that silence of hers, punctuated by heavy breathing, made me all at once feel that I was intruding odiously with my questions. As the seconds passed, however, and she continued to face me, pale-cheeked and heavy-eyed, I began asking myself what the deuce I was there for at that hour of the night but to shelter this wonderful woman from the trouble she had seen looming. I wondered whether Brendish was an utter beast to her. His absence from the Bairds' dinner took on suddenly a sinister – a revolting aspect. . . . What had he stopped behind for? . . . Had Mrs. Brendish by any chance found the owner of the sandals? And if she had! . . .

One thought led to another. I could tell by her face that she had made some kind of discovery upstairs. All at once it occurred to me that that suspicious sound I had heard might have been the noise of two people struggling together. The thought of Brendish possibly assaulting his wife sent a red riot of blood through me and left me very fierce. I had to insist on a reply.

I stepped right up to her. 'Something has happened upstairs' I said. 'What was it?'

GREEN SANDALS

'Nothing,' she returned deliberately.

I was not to be put off from thinking abominable things. 'It seemed to me I heard some one running after you just now,' said I.

With difficulty she took her eyes off mine and glanced up the stairs she had just descended, as though to gauge how much I could have heard. She gave a little tortured laugh. 'After me! Not a bit of it!' she declared hoarsely. 'You're quite mistaken.'

Her assurance did not satisfy me in the least. 'Is your husband upstairs?' I asked.

'Yes, he's upstairs,' said she.

Instinctively I lowered my voice. 'What's he doing?' I demanded.

'He's lying down,' she replied. 'He's - ' She had made no attempt to soften her own tones, but now she ended abruptly and looked me up and down, pursing defiant lips.

She was evidently keeping something back. 'Is he asleep?' I inquired.

She continued to riddle me with a rather stubborn stare. 'Well, he's lying down, anyway,' she declared. Then she added, if possible even more hoarsely than before, 'You needn't mind. *He* won't disturb us!'

This was not very enlightening. . . . What could he have disturbed us at? Following her example, I turned my head and looked up the darkened stairway. There was nothing to be seen above.

'What has happened to him?' I asked.

'Why should anything have happened to him?' she demanded with a smile that was rather forced.

GREEN SANDALS

'He's only keeping quiet. He has very good reasons for keeping quiet.' And this said, she sank down on to the chair nearest me and, with an air of putting an odious subject away from her, she murmured, her voice full of emotion, 'I'm awfully glad you're here, Mr. Staynes.'

'Well,' I declared, standing, trembling, above her, 'if there's anything I can do ! . . .'

I waited for her to command me to the uttermost — to the length even of going upstairs to punch the wild Irishman's head, but for awhile she said nothing. She had nestled fairly into the chair by this time and, as though to show me how my presence was sustaining her, had begun pulling a black silk scarf thoughtfully through her fingers. I felt sure she was glad I was there because she wanted to have some one to defend her from her husband — that long shabby lout who had in the last few minutes shown himself as something unutterably degraded. It made my heart ache to see this glorious woman sitting pitifully there, dependent thus upon friends for physical protection. It was wonderful to have it from her that she was glad I was there. Trembling, I put out my hand and laid it on hers, through which the black silk was slipping smoothly.

'I'm yours till death,' I muttered. 'You can trust me with anything. Tell me what happened upstairs just now.'

She shook her head but did not remove her hand from under mine. 'Not for worlds!' she said. 'Let us put the horrid things behind us and make the most of each other.'

GREEN SANDALS

'Are they very horrid?' I inquired fatuously.

'They're too detestable for words,' she assured me.

I was bent on getting more out of her. 'What's detestable?' I asked. 'Is it what your husband has been doing?'

'What he has been doing and what he's making me do,' was her answer. I felt her hand quivering under mine and pressed it closer. 'Yes, what I'm doing,' she went on. 'You'll understand, though. You'll bear with me. I know you won't misjudge me, whatever happens. You won't need to be told what drove me to it.'

I only half guessed what she meant. I wanted to be assured. 'Drove you to what?' I asked eagerly, and for reply she made a swift movement and I found my fingers imprisoned between her two soft palms and my face as close to hers as it had been on that wonderful occasion in the office *gharry*. A seasoned philanderer would have taken full advantage of that gesture of abandonment. All I could do was to sit and throb ecstatically, not knowing what to make of it all, but dimly proud and happy. If this were the result of the 'driving,' I thought, the more she was driven the better for me!

So we remained with hands united while one might count fifty.

Then, gradually, a change crept over her. Her white shoulders drooped. She tried to release her fingers and to push me gently from her. 'What's the good? What *is* the good?' I heard her whisper, and then, with the next breath, '*That* won't bring him back!'

GREEN SANDALS

It was not me that she was addressing. She was speaking to herself, looking straight over my head. I no longer existed for her. She seemed not to know that I was keeping a firm grasp on her hands.

'Bring whom back?' I asked, trying to force myself again into her consciousness. One thing alone was at the moment clear to me. I didn't want Brendish 'brought back,' whatever that meant. All I desired was that he should be kept away. I was strung up. I would not let go of her fingers. Her effort of avoidance had given me a foretaste of the aching void that would follow on her freeing herself from my grasp. It was more than I could bear. I clung desperately, but she wrenched herself free. She seemed in a moment to have turned superhumanly calm. The strain of liberating herself had, as it were, recalled my existence to her. She looked at me, but with strange new eyes. 'We mustn't be foolish, Mr. Staynes,' she said, and she rubbed her hands quickly together, just as though she were wiping the taint of my clasp off them.

Then she put her freed and cleansed palms against her forehead to shut out visions. I saw her soft black hair ripple tress by tress over her white fingers as she pressed them in and up. She rose at length to her feet and turned straight away from me. 'Don't!' she whispered over her white shoulder. 'Don't! Don't!' (though, God knows, I was doing nothing to her!) after which she began moving towards the stairs down which I had just seen her come.

'You're not going up to him, are you?' I faltered dismally.

GREEN SANDALS

'I'm not going to stop with you,' she murmured back. 'It's not good for me.'

'You don't seem to consider whether it's good for me!' I called out petulantly – loud enough, it struck me, for Brendish to hear. I hardly knew what I was saying. I felt like one from whose parched lips an ice cold drink has on a hot day in April suddenly been snatched.

She had no answer for this unreasonable wail. She merely kept her back turned and began going slowly but resolutely upstairs. She reached the top of the steps. I could hear her shoe soles creaking across the verandah overhead into the silence of the upper storey.

I was as good as dismissed. I stood there by the table with the whisky and soda on it. Insects were pattering against the lamp globe on the wall above my head. The remains of my drink were already full of small struggling objects. . . . I listened. The creaking of the shoes had died away. I heard a chair being pushed softly across the boards upstairs. Then came stillness – stillness of the dead, and I realized that it was getting on towards midnight, that the servants had all gone off for the night to their go-downs, that there was no night *durwan* on the premises. I was all alone below.

She had not said good night to me, but it was clearly intended that I should go. And yet, quite unpardonably, I lingered on. I couldn't bear being sent off like this – without a word – after those blessed moments of close communion. Moreover, I had qualms as to what might happen to her upstairs. I

GREEN SANDALS

hated to think I might hear another scuffle like the first. I stood there, yearning for some sign of recognition from above, feeling more and more certain as the minutes passed that one would come.

She was wonderful! . . . even more wonderful in her going than in her staying. I could not think now how I could possibly have let her out of my hands.

The hush grew in intensity till it began to sing in my head. Then came the soft zigzag flutter of a questing bat. Presently, far away, from the unredeemed darkness of the mango trees, I heard the voice of a Burman – some strayed reveller from a *pwe*, maybe – warbling drearily to himself as he went, to keep the evil spirits away – timelessly and tunelessly. The sound drew near, reached me, thin and plaintive and jerky, from a side road, dwindled, and was finally swallowed up again by the awed silence of that extraordinary night.

At last I turned to go. There had been no sign from above. It looked as though I should get nothing more out of Mrs. Brendish.

And yet I did! My foot was taking off from the topmost of the brick verandah steps, my knees were bent, I was about to walk away disconsolately into the outer gloom, when a call reached me from the upper verandah.

'Come up here a moment, Mr. Staynes,' it said.

I had been expecting a summons of some sort; I had grown furious because it did not come, and yet when it came it came with the shock of the unexpected and I started trembling. I looked up. I saw the white of her gleaming at the top of the stairs.

GREEN SANDALS

She spoke softly and yet, lowered as her voice had been, I knew that the sound of it must have reached Brendish, lying in the inner room. I felt the blood rushing to my face. What did it mean? . . . Had I been made a fool of from the beginning? . . . Why should she want to call me up to where her husband was?

I halted, wavering, at the bottom of the stairs — but not for long. The sight of her, dim and wonderful in the upper gloom, drew me up the steps willy nilly. I must risk it. . . . I felt like daring anything for another touch of her hand.

I came up close below the white arms and face. It must have been my imagination, but she seemed to have grown paler than she was when she went upstairs.

‘What is it?’ I asked and reached out fumblingly in the darkness and caught her by the wrist.

I could feel it pulsing under my fingers as she spoke. ‘I can’t wake him.’ she said, and, though our faces were almost touching, her voice reached me like the voice of a woman twenty yards away.

‘Wake him!’ I whispered back excitedly. ‘Wake your husband! What do you want to wake him for?’

‘Come and see him!’ the far-off voice commanded, and her limp hand suddenly went stiff and clenched mine and pulled. And it was at this moment that I remembered her saying how glad she was I had been there. She had expected something untoward to happen and now it had come! . . . I suddenly found myself wondering how she had known beforehand?

GREEN SANDALS

She drew me with her across the upper verandah, making no effort to move silently. I let myself be dragged, palpitating and distraught . . . towards what? . . . I could not guess. . . . Why should she want to wake him? That was all I thought of at the moment.

She thrust aside the *purdah* that hung over one of the doors and we groped our way across the darkened bedroom with a big bed, swathed in ghostly mosquito nets, in the middle of it. I had expected her to stop at this bed, but she did not. She pushed on to where a light shone through a further door covered by a second *purdah*. This hanging, too, she swept away and we stood shoulder to shoulder and hand in hand in the lamp-lit centre of a small bare room which was evidently Brendish's dressing-room. A shaving-mirror hung near the window, a white jacket dangled against the wall. There was a long row of boots near the door.

She had her free hand close to her mouth and was staring over it. 'Look at him!' she said. 'Just look at him!'

In a long arm-chair lolled Brendish, fully dressed, very long and suspiciously limp. His chin was on his chest, his jacket collar stuck out absurdly from his cropped nape. His head, all in shadow, was tilted uncomfortably. His arms dangled at full length. The back of one hand rested on the wooden boards.

And his face! . . . I looked at it and did not need to be told how it was she had not been able to wake him !

GREEN SANDALS

I gazed from the sprawling figure into her eyes. They met mine with a question peering out of them and to this question I could only nod a dull assent, gulping helplessly and trying to draw in my breath.

'Hadn't we better get a doctor?' I said.

For the life of me I could not say why, but I expected her to say No. However, her reply was, as she snatched her imprisoned hand out of mine, 'Yes, quick! Oh, the little devil!'

'Who?' I demanded, and, as she ignored the question, I put another: 'Was he ill when you left him?' I asked.

'Perfectly well!' she returned. She clutched me suddenly by the arm. 'There's no wound, is there?' she cried.

I refused to consider the possibility of a wound. 'What was his heart like?' I asked.

'Oh, don't talk to me about heart!' she exclaimed. 'What do you think I called you up for? Run and fetch a doctor!'

CHAPTER XIV

IT chanced that Priestley, the Civil Surgeon, lived only two bungalows off. He was a youngish man, stout and white and clean-shaven. I found him in his untidy bachelor verandah – fortunately not yet in bed, though with an eye turned in that direction. He was sitting with a tumbler in his hand, slapping at the mosquitoes that hovered round his bare ankles. He was actually in his pyjamas – loose, gaudy, striped things, and in these enormities he flapped with me across to the Brendishes' house. It comes vividly back to me how fat his pink and white gear made the fellow look as, our goal reached, he and I stood together, breathing quickly in the dim lamplight, over Brendish's body. Mrs. Brendish was not in the room. She had for the moment vanished, I could not say where.

He laid his hand on Brendish's head with, to my mind, quite unnecessary roughness, pushed his chin, tested and dropped the nerveless hand, opened the jacket, listened, sniffed.

'Quite dead!' he informed me with professional finality. 'What did he have for dinner?'

'Heaven only knows!' I returned. 'He must have had dinner alone. Mrs. Brendish and I were dining at the Bairds'.'

'Of course you were!' he murmured, hitching at his pyjamas. 'I was there too. Was this why he couldn't come with her, eh? Out of sorts, was he? Did she say anything about his being ill?'

His glance travelled sharply round the room.

GREEN SANDALS

'How long has he been like this?' he inquired. 'Was there anything near him just now? — any glass or anything he might have drunk out of? Who was with him while Mrs. Brendish was away?'

I stared round vacantly. There was a small table at the side of the dead man's chair, the very place where one would have looked for anything like a medicine glass. It was bare, however, except for a watch and chain, evidently the property of the dead man.

'Don't ask me!' I cried, fingering the top of the table impotently. I felt a dull resentment at his peppering me thus with vital questions when by rights he should have been probing some more enlightened person.

And why wasn't she there — that more enlightened person — to be probed? . . . Where had she gone? I looked up and round. Priestley followed my gaze and seemed to catch the drift of my thought.

'Where's Mrs. Brendish?' he asked.

'She was here just now,' said I.

Even as I spoke she appeared, stepping in through a door that seemed to lead into a bathroom. She began as though she had been in the room with us the whole time. 'There has been only one person with him since dinner,' she said, coming straight into the conversation; and then she added, 'I've been looking about. A woman did this.'

I looked sharply round at her. 'A woman!' I cried.

'Yes. I saw her,' was her reply. 'It must have been her! . . . A Burmese woman!'

GREEN SANDALS

'Where did you see her?' I demanded. 'Here? Upstairs?'

'Yes, up here,' she said. 'Not ten minutes ago.'

'While I was away calling Priestley?' I asked.

'No, before then,' she said. 'Before I asked you to come up.'

'My God, Mrs. Brendish!' I cried. 'Why didn't you tell me this before?'

'You might have guessed!' she retorted.

I stared open-mouthed at her, making nothing of this. 'Is she anywhere about still?' I asked, and then Priestley spoke for the first time since her appearance on the scene. 'Good Lord, Mrs. Brendish! Yes, why didn't you tell him about her? He might have got hold of her!'

All she replied to this was, 'Oh, she's miles away of course by this time. Is there any mark of a wound?'

Priestley made a show of looking the body over. He knew as well as I did that there was no wound, but he seemed, strangely enough, to be hoping against hope that he would discover one. Of course there was none to discover. Presently he drew himself up. 'He wouldn't look like that if he had been stabbed,' he informed us didactically. He stood there, picking at his fingers and breathing heavily, and I could see that all the time he was steadily sniffing the air.

At last, as we watched him in a sort of fascinated way, he spoke again, turning his face up towards the punkah which was almost level with his baldish head, bringing out his words exactly as if he were

GREEN SANDALS

addressing the dangling frill of it. 'Excuse me,' he said. 'You mustn't mind my asking, but wasn't there some financial embarrassment?'

She caught him up quickly. 'Never! Don't dare to suggest it!' she cried. 'The Chetty's case, you mean? Yes, I know, but it couldn't have been that! . . . Not my husband! . . . And when the woman was there all the time, too!'

'Could you recognize her?' I asked.

'Of course I could,' she returned. 'She was sneaking along there within a yard of me.' She pointed in the direction of the stairs. 'It was Ma E,' she declared.

Everything was coming back to me in a new light. 'Good Heavens! were those her sandals down below?' I asked.

'Whose did you think they were?' she in her turn demanded.

I had expected Priestley to be roused at this and to ask about the sandals. However, he did not. He let it go past him, as he continued picking at his fingers, just as though he had not been listening. When he did speak again it was to say, with a return of his professional manner, 'Please remember that it's none of my business to inquire into motives for this, that and the other. What I've got to do is to ascertain precisely what was the cause of death. There will have to be a post mortem, Mrs. Brendish. I can sign no certificate without. I'll see about it the first thing to-morrow morning. Meanwhile I must ask you to leave things just as they are — *just* as they are — do you understand?'

GREEN SANDALS

He seemed to be making a great point of this. Almost reluctantly he as good as put her on her honour. 'As they are, at any rate, till Mr. Venne comes,' he went on. 'As you seem to think it's a case of foul play, I'll send round to him. He ought to be here pretty soon. By the way, the body ought to be taken to the mortuary.'

'I want Mr. Venne to know everything,' was all she said to this – in a small determined voice.

'Right. Wait till he turns up,' he murmured, and next moment he had gone from us, the sickly lamp-light showing off his outrageous undulating stripes as he tiptoed out of the presence of the dead. Mrs. Brendish and I listened in silence to the padding of his bare feet (he had not even stopped to put his slippers on). Down below he seemed to have encountered some of the domestic staff, for there was the sound of voices – of orders softly given. The noise of hushed movement on the stairs began.

Out of the nearer stillness Mrs. Brendish's voice reached me. 'I don't want any of the servants to come up,' she muttered.

'I'll see to that,' said I, but I did not see to it immediately. What I did was to turn upon her, my emotions unpent. I wanted her explanation. 'Why didn't you tell me straight off about the woman?' I cried with a sense of vague foreboding.

Her eyes gave no indication that she had heard me speak. They were fixed on the figure drooping in the chair between us. Her lips were moving in a dazed way without making any sound. I took a

GREEN SANDALS

step closer to her and touched her on the arm. This seemed to bring her to a consciousness of my presence.

'Not tell you?' she whispered. 'Ah, yes, all that time below you mean! Oh, I was mad with him! . . . Mad! You might have guessed. I wanted to – to pay him out. . . . Couldn't you see?' With an effort she took her eyes off the body and fixed them full upon me. 'You must have known about her!' she declared with conviction.

A light dawned. 'What!' I exclaimed. 'You mean it was her I heard that time upstairs when I thought some one was running after you?'

She nodded.

'Well but –' I objected, feeling toils close round me, 'you said he was lying down – lying down and wouldn't disturb us. Did you know about this then?'

'How should I?' she returned. 'No, certainly not that anything like *this* had happened! I thought she was there for some other reason. Good Heavens, I didn't *dream* – I'

She sat down suddenly in a small chair by the dressing-table with her clasped hands moving convulsively in her lap. 'Is that anyone outside?' she murmured.

I lifted the *purdah* and peered into the outer darkness. It seemed to me that there had been the sound of movement in the bedroom, but I could see nothing. If it had been one of the servants he had gone again. 'There's nobody there now,' I said, and I turned back to Mrs. Brendish again. Her dark

GREEN SANDALS

eyes covered me and she spoke again. 'I was very angry with him just now,' she told me.

'Angry?' I repeated dully.

'Well, wouldn't you have been angry if you had thought it was that other reason?' she demanded with amazement in her voice. She lifted her joined hands chin high and dropped them again with a gesture that protested at my dullness. 'Wouldn't you have thought the same, Mr. Staynes?' Then, before I could answer, she brought out an extraordinary question. 'What do you think I brought you back with me from the Bairds' for?' she demanded.

'Brought me back!' I echoed passionately. It was all beginning to come out. I suddenly felt as though I had been shamefully tricked. I began to spy lurking pitfalls everywhere. 'What do you mean?' I cried, feeling very blank and fierce.

She refused to take her eyes off me. 'You know well enough what I mean!' she retorted. 'In the *gharry*. . . . You can't have forgotten. Didn't I tell you beforehand not to think ill of me, whatever happened this evening?'

It came back to me that she had indeed murmured something disquieting to this effect during that short moonlight drive, leaning forward there on the narrow seat, with her face close to mine. 'You did,' I faltered. 'You seemed to think something terrible was going to happen.'

Her hands went quickly up together. 'Exactly!' she cried. 'And here it all is! Oh, didn't I know?'

GREEN SANDALS

Through a buzzing bewilderment I was aware that my breath was coming faster and faster. 'How did you know?' I whispered with a heaving chest. 'Tell me. How did you know?'

An awful feeling gripped and shook me. I couldn't see all the workings of the thing yet, but one fact stood out clear. I had been brought to the spot – deliberately – of set purpose – in that joggling office *gharry* – in order to be witness of a fulfilment! The idea was too ghastly for words! . . . All at once I seemed to see her again as she had appeared to me coming slowly down the stairs. Staring at her from my long arm-chair I had pictured her then in the image of Lady Macbeth coming down with blood on her hands. . . . She had been very angry with her husband – 'mad' with him. . . . Mad, yes that was the word she had just used. . . . She had thought the very worst of him. . . . She had come to the house full of a foreknowledge of tragedy. . . . She had brought me with her from the Bairds' with an object . . . me! . . . me! . . . What did it all point to?

I don't know what possessed me, but I found myself saying in a hoarse whisper, 'I suppose you got me to come so that I might say there was a woman!'

She did not follow the workings of my mind. 'Heavens, no!' she cried. 'What do you mean? There *was* a woman! . . . You heard her! . . . You said you heard her scuttling away when I came down – the first thing.' She looked me up and down as though daring me to go back on my words – with

GREEN SANDALS

all that they implied. Then (as I had nothing to say) having, so to speak, got my admission out of me a second time, she followed her challenge up with a cry of 'Just imagine if you hadn't heard!' and left me to face the picture she had evoked by her last words.

It was some little time later that she said wearily, 'We can do nothing more to-night. She may be anywhere by now. . . . To-morrow . . .'

'Mr. Venne will be here before long, I expect,' I said.

'Yes,' she returned. 'Don't wait, Mr. Staynes. You go off to bed.'

Heaven knows, with all I had on my mind, I did not want to stay. I wanted to get away and see where I stood. At the same time it hurt me that she should wish to bundle me off thus without ceremony – me, whose hand she had been holding when the supreme moment of discovery came. It was I who should be with her now . . . while she was interviewing Venne. I couldn't bear to think of them alone together. I tried to stand up against her. 'I can't leave you!' I protested; but she was as firm as a rock. 'I'm not going to have you wait!' she declared with passion, and then, as though to mitigate the brusqueness of her command, she held out a hand to me and cried with all the fervour that was in her, 'Thank God, Mr. Staynes! Oh, thank God I had you there!'

I took her hand and pressed it, duly proud and deeply grateful, but wondering, as I did so, whether I could honestly echo her cry of thankfulness. . . .

GREEN SANDALS

Should I ever live to regret having been mixed up with this horrible business?

After this there was nothing left for me but to go home.

On the road outside, when I had covered a hundred yards or so, there clattered past me in a hurried manner a high dog-cart, heading for the Brendishes' bungalow. It was not so dark but what I recognized Venne as one of the two men who sat in it. I called out to him. Whether he heard me or not I cannot say, but no effort was made to pull up the trap, which plunged on into the night.

I did not turn back to follow it. To tell the truth, I simply dared not. I made for my chummery.

The house was dark and still when I arrived. I undressed. I crept into my hot bed – more to escape the mosquitoes than for any desire to sleep. Automatically I closed my eyes, but they were presently open again, and for long uneasy hours I lay, staring out into the darkness, watching the outline of my window where the fringed fronds of a coconut palm swung lazily against the stars, refusing to keep rhythm with the steady pounding of my heart.

Like those moving leaves, my mind was swayed by alternate gusts – at one moment by fear, downright abject fear – at another by something that was at bottom a fierce guilty exultation. I was devoured by romance.

I went over every petty detail of the evening, imprinted each fact of the astonishing business afresh on my fevered brain. I tried to recall each

GREEN SANDALS

word that had dropped from Mrs. Brendish's lips, each turn of her head, each movement of her imperishable white shoulders, all of which, had, in the light of later happenings, acquired a new significance.

Everything seemed to point towards the same extraordinary – the same terrifying end!

There had been another woman upstairs, she had said. Maybe, but it was not that other woman's hand that had done the deed. I could see it all now! By some means or other, Mrs. Brendish, goaded by great wrongs, yielding to an impulse that overmastered her, had put an end for ever to her wretched husband's misdoings. How, or when, it was not for me to say. But this I knew – she had been angry with Brendish – mad with him (as well, indeed, she might be!), she had spoken to me, darkly but deliberately, of recent provocation – provocation that hinged on a pair of green sandals on the verandah floor; driving from the Bairds' she had a grim foreknowledge of a tragedy that was imminent; above all, she had entreated me not to judge her harshly. All along, I could see, she had been preparing me for the final act!

Judge her harshly! Who was I to judge her? I could not look at the deed apart from its incitement. The case cried out against the applying of ordinary tests. Mrs. Brendish rose before my eyes as a figure beyond all reckoning piteous – tragic as never woman before. The violence of the act was only the measure of the suffering that had preceded it. What she must have gone through, poor soul! . . . I

GREEN SANDALS

thought of old Baird, pawky and perspiring, sucking his cheeks in under his office punkah and murmuring outrageous hints, and I ventured a shrewd guess that the intrigue between Brendish and Ma E had been long known to every one in Mingin save myself. What must the wife's feelings have been as she watched that uncouth unfaithful bankrupt pile indiscretion on indiscretion! Provocation indeed! No wonder she had at last seen red!

Judge her harshly! Heaven forbid!

How she had trusted me! Amazing that she should have been able to cry out, as though in despair at my obtuseness, 'What do you think I brought you back with me from the Bairds' for?'

I could see now why it was *me* she had brought. Hadn't I murmured in the lower verandah, 'I am yours till death!' And hadn't she known it all along? Obviously the person she wanted by her side that night was the man who could whisper to her that glorious assurance.

She could trust that man – trust him to see her through, to speak for her – if need be, to lie for her.

That was what she expected of me. And the astounding thing was that I was prepared to do it. The idea would have been unthinkable yesterday, but all values had changed since then. I was frightened, deadly frightened, of all it might lead to. I cursed myself for leaving her before she had given me a clear line of action to follow, and yet I was ready – all panic-stricken as I was – to swear that nothing on earth should make me betray the trust that strange passionate woman had reposed in me.

GREEN SANDALS

I was hers till death. . . . And she had known it and had taken this way of showing me she was mine till death!

This way. . . . Yes! For all at once I found myself gulping and wondering whether, if it hadn't been for my coming thus into Mrs. Brendish's life, Brendish might not have been alive at this moment!

It was a terrible thought, but it came and stuck. I couldn't get away from this new idea that, by rights, I was as much a contributory cause as the owner of the green sandals. It was no good assuring myself in my occasional lapses into panic that I hadn't led Mrs. Brendish on. If I hadn't led her on I had lent myself passionately to her leading, and this ghastly business was the result! It was practically I who had nerved her arm this night. I must bear my share. There were three of us responsible for what had happened — Honoria Brendish and Ma E and I. The wild Irishman's blood was on our joint heads! The thought terrified me, but there was a glory underlying the terror which would not let me be scared, so to speak, out of Mrs. Brendish's arms.

Though she had as good as made me an accomplice I couldn't find it in me to blame her. It was altogether too wonderful for words that she should have done what she had done for *my* sake. . . . I was in for it — I was in for it up to the neck! I should have to lie, to prevaricate, to bluster, to do all kinds of things I had never done before; but I knew that with her prevailing presence to uphold me I should be able to accomplish all she expected of me.

GREEN SANDALS

With every hour of my vigil my admiration for her seemed to grow. It wasn't as though there were no alternations of panic. At times I was deadly frightened of what lay ahead of me. They say perfect love casts out fear. My love, I must confess, was far from perfect. I couldn't cast my fear out altogether. At times it had to buzz and throttle me, but there was one thing it never made me do. I felt I could never blame Mrs. Brendish for what had happened. She stood out glorious. It was fine! I likened it to Jael and Sisera. I longed for Deborah's tongue to extol the deed.

I had a kind of idea that if ever we two came out of the business alive together, it would be my duty – nay, my privilege – to marry Mrs. Brendish. . . . When all was said and done, she wasn't so very much older than I!

III. VENNE CLEANS UP

CHAPTER XV

THEY told me – the people in the Secretariat – when they sent me the orders for my transfer from Namlon to Mingin, that I had been long enough up north on the frontier. They talked about seniority and soft jobs till I was sick. I didn't want a move in the least, and it was natural that I shouldn't. I had learnt all the local hill dialects except Maru. I had grown so accustomed to the fresh nip in the air and the noisy cold streams where the *mahseer* lurked, and the steep zigzag hill paths that led to the high-perched outposts, and the daily possibility of a turn up with the Kachins, that I felt I couldn't do without them. I had hoped they were going to let me finish the last few years of my service among the border tribes, and you can fancy my feelings when I learnt that instead I was to go off and do *babu's* work and stew in a filthy crowded seaport right away in Lower Burma!

Up north one was in the saddle half the day and caught one's criminals like gentlemen in the fresh air of the mountain-side, with the chance of burning powder in the process. In Mingin, if ever an opium smuggler was fool enough to get caught, he put up his hands, as a rule, tamely in a squalid bazaar slum that stank of fish-paste and *durians*, and was usually clamouring for a first interview with his advocate all the way to the police station. Ordinarily, however, one's highly paid energies were there concentrated on nothing more perilous than seeing that some exasperating Madrasi didn't drive a cart with-

GREEN SANDALS

out a licence and suffered all the rigours of the law if he bathed at an unauthorized Municipal hydrant. It was peaceful, perhaps, but they weren't going to persuade me it was a Sahib's job.

Altogether it was thoroughly disgusting! . . . However, a *hukum* is a *hukum*, and so, having exhausted my protests, I sold my ponies and fishing tackle and said good-bye to my Kachins (none of whom would venture south with me), and down I came like a lamb, watching the temperature rise steadily each day of my journey. The rains were just over and, as I crossed the Irrawaddy at Sagaing on an October afternoon with the burning hot corrugated iron roof of the ferry steamer a few feet above my head, I began to realize what my blessed five years up on the frontier had saved me from. On board the boat they showed me the exact spot, near the wheel, where a thick-necked forest officer of my acquaintance had dropped dead of heat apoplexy three days before, and I recollect saying, when I heard of his seizure, that I was not in the least surprised. The dry zone was a breathless oven; Rangoon, where I had to stop a night or two, a Turkish bath; and I was devoutly glad when, five days after leaving Namlon, I saw my traps finally taken out of the bullock carts and dumped in the verandah of my bungalow at Mingin, under the shadow of the Shwezigon pagoda, which I noticed had been freshly re-gilt.

It was a matter of eighteen years since I had left the station. I had expected the place to have altered almost beyond recognition, but, as a matter of fact,

GREEN SANDALS

everything was very much the same as when I had quitted it as a *chokra*. The Shwezigon, with its flashy new layer of gold-leaf, was as much altered as anything. There were some new hot-looking commercial *pucca* buildings down by the wharf, and a rather pretentious stucco Customs House had taken the place of the old wooden shanty on the river front, but otherwise the Government offices were all as I remembered them and, up in the Cantonment, they hadn't even run to a new club-house.

It was a different case, however, with the residents. Under the aged club punkahs fresh faces were the almost invariable rule, and what few old faces remained had grown yellower and puffier and more lined. Some of those worthies who in my young days, I remembered, had been dubbed the 'Old Guard' still survived, but most of them were no more. The Huskissons and the Brophys – household names in the days when the century was still in its infancy – had disappeared. The young people had married and left the place, the old ones had moved up into the cemetery. Moggridge, who had shared an extremely lucrative practice at the Bar with old Huskisson when I was a young Assistant Superintendent of Police – the redoubtable Moggridge, whom I had rather looked up to as a beardless youngster, had retired and was living in a dreary teak house on the outskirts of the Cantonment. He had taken to himself a heavy Eurasian wife in the interval, and had lost flesh and had dwindled away into a plaintive garrulous old man,

GREEN SANDALS

with baggy eyelids and a trembling mouth. His place in the courts had been taken by a couple of brisk Armenian pleaders.

There were a few of my own contemporaries still to the fore, mostly the Sarkies-Minus lot. Sally Minus, an old flame of mine, had married Wapshott, the Collector of Customs, and had not only grown fat herself but had produced a very stout family. Daisy Sarkies lived, a harsh, grey-haired spinster, with her old father, in the same rambling bungalow on the ridge, while her cousin, the sprightly Harriet, had fallen on her feet (as, indeed, she had always promised to do) and had become Mrs. Baird, wife of Baird of Blackburns', a firm which, now that the Germans were all gone, was admittedly the leading business house in Mingin.

The European officials were all different, but there were still plenty of Eurasians and Burmans in the Government offices who professed, with more or less truth, to have known me in the old days. A good many of the less reputable members of Mingin society, too, were quite ready to make the same declaration. For instance, old Muzaffar Khan, the well-known receiver of stolen property, was still flourishing like a green bay tree. He had done a six-months' term in jail since I had seen him last, but that had only made him a shade more circumspect in his methods. His business was transacted precisely as before, but, outwardly at any rate, he was quite the law-abiding citizen and, though you would hardly believe it, had very nearly got on to the Municipal Committee. He came round to see

GREEN SANDALS

me very soon after my arrival, with a new gold-fringed *pagri* on, mainly, I believe, to discover how much my subordinates had told me about him, and was at pains to assure me, with his fine old white beard wagging protestingly, that if I had been in the place when trouble overtook him, he would have been able to show me (as he had failed to show my successor) how brazen the charge was that had been trumped up against him. They told me after he had gone that most of his former confederates – Lim Soo, Ali Muhammad, Ko Waing, and all that crew – were either dead or doing time. There was plenty of new blood, however, to take the place of the old; in fact, from what I heard, there never had been so much crime as when I arrived. It was all of the meaner and pettier sort, however. Murders had fallen off and there was barely a respectable dacoity to make a little travelling allowance over; but small thefts were on the increase and cocaine smuggling had been increasing by leaps and bounds while I was away.

The contraband business was mostly, so they told me, in the hands of a Mussulman from Upper India, known as Khattak Shah (I don't know whether it was his real name), who had given the police many a bad quarter of an hour. Several of his agents had been caught and dealt with, but they had all been staunch and had refused to give their principal away, with the result that the beggar went unscathed up and down the alley-ways of Mingin – a big scowling bully of a man. Most of his tools were women, who slunk about the port area and were occasionally encoun-

GREEN SANDALS

tered in jungle villages right down the coast. I gathered that he paid them well.

And this reminds me that my activities in connection with this 'habitual' brought me, soon after my arrival, up against an old acquaintance whom I had never expected to find in Mingin. One of Khattak Shah's jackals was a woman named Ma E, half Burman, half Indian and altogether undesirable. This female, after a chequered career in Upper Burma, had wormed her disreputable way south to Mingin and had attached herself to a certain San Dun, an Arakanese, who had taken up domestic service among the Europeans. It appeared that San Dun was, when I arrived, employed as cook by some people called Brendish. Brendish was a business man who had come to Mingin shortly after I had left — a queer, mooning, sheep of a fellow. I wanted to speak to him about Ma E and, as there seemed no chance of laying hands on him at the club, I went round to his house one morning to drop a cautionary hint. As it happened, Brendish was out, but as it also happened, Mrs. Brendish was in. I saw her in the lower verandah doing her bazaar accounts and made the discovery that she was none other than Honoria Ryder, whom I had known as a child in the old days. Tom Ryder, her father, had been Executive Engineer in Mingin, and I had often seen the daughter and spoken to her. I recalled a sedate young thing in a big white sun hat, rather sweet faced, standing on a hot laterite road and switching the dust off her feet with a fly whisk. She had had a solemn mouth that twitched happily on

GREEN SANDALS

occasions, and a thick black pigtail down her back. She was fifteen or sixteen then, I should think; much too old, in any case, to be still out in Burma. She remembered my name when I mentioned it, and the fact that we had at least half a dozen quaint old memories in common encouraged me to stop on and tell her something of what I had meant to tell her husband about her cook's wife.

I don't know that she was much surprised at what I had to say, though she confessed that, so far as she knew, Ma E was quite a respectable member of society. 'She sells in the bazaar, you know,' she told me, reminding me, as she did so, what big unflinching black eyes she had had as a child eighteen years back.

'Oh, don't I just know!' said I. 'She sells lots of things. Do you know what?'

She nodded her head gravely. 'Cheroots,' she said.

'Yes, and other things too,' I observed, and left it to her to guess what the other things were, though I added, 'Your husband will know the kind of things if you don't. You ask him.'

At this, rather to my surprise, she exclaimed, 'I had rather my husband were told nothing about it.'

I nodded. 'All right,' I said, 'I understand.' As a matter of pure fact, I was not at all sure that I did understand. For the moment I supposed that Brendish, whom I barely knew by sight, was one of those nervous fussy creatures who would be in a taking about the business and want to turn the man and wife out neck and crop forthwith. There was no

GREEN SANDALS

need for this; in fact, I had told Mrs. Brendish that I should prefer the woman to be under her eye, so to speak, till I needed her.

I looked my hostess up and down as we parted at one end of the verandah, near where a hibiscus bush stood, covered with crimson bell blossoms. She had grown into a large care-worn woman. Without those old-time memories to pave the way I doubt whether I should have seen anything out of the common in her, but I am free to say that when I called to mind that taking child with a plait down her back and all the world before her, and saw the tragedy that looked out of the replica of that child face, I had the queerest sensation at the back of my throat. It seemed pitifully unfair that out of those happy beginnings she should have grown up into something so big and joyless. Why had people let her get like this? What had her husband been about?

I suddenly had an odd feeling of having missed something, and missed it quite unnecessarily. 'How was it I didn't know you were here before?' I demanded, as I picked up my *topi*, feeling that I couldn't with decency stop any longer. 'I could have come and seen you earlier,' I explained.

She looked at me with that amazingly direct glance of hers. 'Why, you've only been here a fortnight,' she observed, just as though fortnights were little things one could afford to waste at our time of life. Then she took her eyes off me and looked away. 'You see, I don't often go out,' she explained. 'People forget to talk about me. I should be the last

GREEN SANDALS

person for you to hear about outside.' She drew a deep breath and then, apologetically, as though further light were needed, she went on: 'I've been here fifteen years, but I've never really been taken into Mingin's bosom. I haven't got connexions all over the place, like some of them have. You see, I'm not one of the —'

'One of the Old Guard?' I suggested, and for a moment her face relaxed and I was reminded of the little girl with a black plait who could, for all her solemn little mouth, laugh occasionally. She seemed amused at my having the name so pat.

I left her standing rather wistfully there, in a striped dress, on the edge of the verandah, with the laughter fading slowly out of her eyes and a lot of very green maidenhair fern in pots behind her.

CHAPTER XVI

I SPOKE about the Brendishes to Priestley, the Civil Surgeon, a day or two later at the club. We had both been playing polo hard. 'What's the *matter* with them, Priestley?' I asked him across the little marble-topped table on which our drinks stood, and I peered at him rather closely in the lamplight, for I wanted to see whether he agreed with me in thinking Brendish and his wife a bit out of the common.

He pinched his mouth together and nodded his head. 'Matter!' said he. 'Everything's the matter! Ah, if they'd only let people *know*! . . . Keeps himself to himself, Brendish does. . . . They tell me he's not much thought of in the bazaar. . . . Harmless? Oh, rather. A child might play with him, for all his ugly mug. . . . Oh, they get on all right together, so far as I can see. . . . Kind to her? . . . Too kind, I should say, if anything. . . . You know what I mean. . . . A gawk, that's what he is, but a most innocuous one.'

'And she?' I asked. 'What do you think of her?'

He cocked his chin and looked at me sideways. 'You knew her as a girl, I expect,' he returned. 'How he guessed I haven't an idea.'

'I did,' said I, and somehow I felt bound to add, 'And a nice child she was.'

'For all I know,' he observed, 'she may be damned nice still. But don't ask me! She never has anything to say to anyone. There's only one soul in Mingin she'll look at.'

GREEN SANDALS

'Who's that?' I asked – in a way that made him raise his eyebrows.

'Young Staynes,' he said, blinking.

'Staynes! I don't know him,' said I. 'What's he in?'

'Blackburns,' he replied. 'You haven't met him yet, eh? Well, you may take it from me that you haven't missed much. A young ass, he is! He's round at the Brendishes every evening. What he finds in her to amuse him beats me, but that's the young man's business, not mine. She ought to know better at her age.'

'Know better than what?' I demanded. For old sake's sake I felt I ought to put up some kind of fight for the woman who had once been Honoria of the generous pigtail. 'Know better than what?' I repeated a little more distinctly, and then I added, 'She's not as old as you seem to think, either, my lad.'

He had nothing to say to this for the moment. He took a long pull at his drink and then he sat with his mouth screwed up rubbing his tumbler gently on the table. Finally he spoke. 'She does come to the club sometimes,' he declared, as though he had resolved to make every allowance he could for Mrs. Brendish. Then he flicked at a mosquito on his forehead. 'Vennel' he exclaimed. 'Why do people like that marry? If she had tried to make herself agreeable – as she could have if she had wanted to – she might have helped poor old Brendish on no end, but, as it is, he's of no account whatever.' He scratched at the point where the mosquito

GREEN SANDALS

had settled and wound up with a fervent 'Silly ass!'

'Why silly ass?' I demanded, a little louder, perhaps, than need be. 'A silly ass to have married her?'

He screwed up his mouth again. 'Heavens, no!' he returned. 'Did you think it was Brendish I was talking about? Brendish is all right. It was Staynes I meant.'

I made a special point of having Staynes shown to me that same evening at the club. I was still musing with amazement over the way Mingin had failed to appraise Mrs. Brendish at her full worth and was prepared to admit that, whatever might be said against the young man, he might have his moments of vision. After all, however, Priestley was quite right. This time I hadn't wasted a fortnight. Staynes was a young ass, sure enough — fresh from home, fond of laying down the law, untidy too, with a silly little tuft of hair sticking up at the back of his head when he took his *topi* off. I wished, as I looked at him, that he had been in the police so that I might have had a chance of showing him bluntly what I thought about him. One thing I will say for the fellow, however. People seemed to think that he spent his evenings holding Mrs. Brendish's hand and gazing into her eyes. As a matter of fact, so I discovered, what he went for (primarily, at any rate) was to play chess with Brendish. Chess mark you! . . . And he in his twenties! It was the kind of game he *would* play! If, as now appeared quite possible, he saw nothing special in Mrs. Brendish, then, indeed, the youth was past praying for!

I tried to get in touch with Brendish that same

GREEN SANDALS

evening, but he was not there, nor did I make his acquaintance till a week after I had made his wife's. Then one evening I strolled into the club reading-room and some one pointed him out to me. He was leaning back in a long arm-chair, looking past the tip of his pug nose at the ceiling, with his tongue working under his pasty cheeks and his fingers together under his chin – like a pious Buddhist's at a pagoda.

I asked to be introduced to him.

'Eh . . . Eh?' he said, as though coming out of a trance when my name was mentioned, and he pushed himself slowly out of his chair on to his legs like a jointed Dutch doll. One could almost hear him creak as he rose. He held out a hand which by rights should have been stiff and wooden, but was, as a matter of fact, moist and flabby.

'I've met your wife,' I said, feeling that he ought to know why I was asking for an introduction.

He looked me up and down in an irresolute sort of way, repeating my name under his breath. 'Ah, yes!' he said at last. 'You knew her many years ago, didn't you?' (He spoke as though she were sixty!) 'She mentioned having seen you,' he went on. 'She was full of it. She told me –'

Then, just as he promised to become interesting, for I was anxious to hear what she had told him about me, the creature dismissed his wife from consideration. 'I don't think we met in the old days,' he observed, avoiding my eye and blinking at the punkah over our heads. 'I fancy you left just before I came here. You chummed with J. R. Huskisson,

GREEN SANDALS

didn't you? He used often to talk about you, I remember. He's dead, you know, J. R. is – killed by dacoits near Tavoy. . . . Elsbury too. Wasn't he in your chummery as well? I liked old Elsbury. . . .' He mentioned one or two more names, and then, having – more or less against my will – got me interested again, he switched off abruptly a second time.

'Look here, I've been wanting to speak to you for some little time,' he declared, clasping and unclasping his hands.

'Ah!' I observed, not altogether encouragingly.

'It's about a woman,' he went on.

'A woman?' I repeated. For the moment my mind was full of one woman and I couldn't imagine even Brendish referring to her in these terms.

'Yes,' he told me. 'It's just possible that your inspectors and people may have been trying to set you against her. She's all right. You can take it from me that she's all right. She's as straight as a die.'

'Whom do you mean?' I demanded.

'A Burman,' said he. 'My cook's wife. She rolls cheroots. You may have seen her in the bazaar. Good cheroots they are too. I can vouch for it that she's quite respectable. She lives in the compound.'

'Respectable, is she?' said I. 'I'm very glad to hear it!'

I should ordinarily have said a good deal more, in fact I all but let Brendish have the whole of Ma E's story, so far as the police knew it. But as the words began to frame themselves, I thought better of it.

GREEN SANDALS

Mrs. Brendish had asked me to say nothing about the woman to her husband and I began to wonder now whether that was because she feared lest everything I had come to say should be passed on forthwith, chapter and verse, to Ma E herself. It looked suspiciously as though, where that sleek little cheroot-roller was concerned, Brendish simply wasn't to be trusted.

'Well, well,' I said at last. 'I'm glad you've mentioned the woman. I shall bear in mind that you have given her a good *chit*.'

We stood there for a while, facing each other, each of us, I fancy, waiting for the other to say something more. My companion was stroking his throat nervously. From the billiard-room behind me came the click, click of the balls and the monotonous wail of the Madrasi marker calling the score. Then Brendish seemed to wrench his head away from me and, with his eyes on the ground, let drop earnestly a sentence I could only just hear. 'By the way, I do hope you won't let my wife know!' he murmured.

I opened my eyes wide at this. Up till then I had supposed that his wife had, after all, decided to tell him of my visit, but this did not look like it. 'Who was it told you the police had anything against the woman?' I asked.

'San Dun, her husband, my cook,' he replied.

'Did San Dun say anyone had been round about her?' I demanded.

'Round about her? No,' he made answer, showing clearly that he had heard nothing of my visit. I expected him to ask me next whether anyone *had*

GREEN SANDALS

been round about her and began debating in my mind how to put the fellow off if he did. However, he went on, 'You see, the other day, soon after you arrived, he - San Dun - spoke about you to me.'

'Oh, did he!' said I. 'Was that off his own bat?'

'I imagine so,' he made answer. 'Anyway, he said you were new to the place and didn't know the ins and outs of things. He was sure the head constable of the town guard would try to put you against Ma E. You know they have got a *zid* against her - the police. I can't think why. I've known her for years.'

He made a poor stumbling business of it with his protestations. I felt inclined to inform him, with reference to his last request, that, as a matter of fact, Mrs. Brendish now knew pretty well as much against Ma E as the head constable did, but again I kept myself in. 'Ah!' I observed dryly. 'So it was the fond husband who spoke, was it!' Then with a final 'Well, I'll bear in mind what you've said,' I turned and let Brendish crumple up into his long arm-chair again. I gave him no promise - no undertaking of any kind.

CHAPTER XVII

I LEFT the club and walked off along the road towards my bungalow. The night was a stifling one. The *padauk* trees planted by the roadside met overhead and seemed to keep all the hot air pressed down upon one. The flying foxes were busy in the branches. Through the bare tree stems I could see the grey level of the *maidan* stretching away towards the river, where the launches were hooting, like night owls, intermittently.

It was not the heat that made me feel physically sick. I had asked to be introduced to Brendish, honestly prepared to find what good gifts I could in him, but what was I to think of him now? I remember as I came out into the open from under the trees, stopping dead in the middle of the road and saying out loud, with a sort of half-suppressed fury, 'San Dun, indeed!' and thumping my stick on the road. That was at the moment when I became finally sure that San Dun had never breathed a word about police oppression, but that San Dun's master had got his instructions to approach me straight from San Dun's wife. There was no need for anyone to tell me why that big awkward scarecrow of a chap was stooping to eat dirt like this. Did he really fancy that at a word from him I would consent to cover his dubious dealings up?

I had not promised Brendish not to tell his wife, and now it occurred to me that, even if I couldn't pass on to her everything he had said to me, I could at least urge her to bundle Ma E neck and crop out

GREEN SANDALS

of the compound. I really believe that I should have tried then and there to catch her at home alone before her husband came back from the club if the thought hadn't come to me that quite possibly she already had a shrewd suspicion of how the land lay. I went over our recent talk together in the light of this new theory and made the discovery that there was a good deal in what she had said that bore out the view.

It was an odious conclusion to come to. It made me vaguely uncomfortable, for once I was started off in this direction, I hardly knew where to stop. All at once I began to see something sinister in Staynes's position in the Brendish *ménage*. For a few miserable minutes I began to lose faith in Mrs. Brendish herself. If she had her suspicions, why ever didn't she pack San Dun and Ma E off for good and all? Could she conceivably have thought of playing the boy off against the bazaar seller?

I am glad to say these vile doubts did not torment me long. I had only to call to mind Mrs. Brendish's straight, honest, careworn way of looking at one to recover peace of mind. I saw she must have had reasons of her own that I knew nothing of for holding her hand. Obviously she didn't want to bring things to a head if the worst could by any means be avoided. She hoped, poor soul, to recover Brendish in her own way. By the time I was on to the grass of the *maidan* I was calling myself an unmannerly swine for harbouring these doubts about her.

At the same time, while I absolved that pure soul of connivance, I had no compunction about

GREEN SANDALS

imputing the most sordid motives to young Staynes himself. It looked to me very much as though Brendish's weakness for the little Burman baggage was suiting that young gentleman's book admirably. Who was to say that it wouldn't pay him to let the thing develop? There was no need to tell him that what was sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander also. . . . If only I had been sure of it, I should have sought the young cub out and thrashed him within an inch of his life.

Of course I wasn't sure – which, unfortunately, made all the difference. And yet something I saw some few weeks later brought me almost to the brink of certitude.

My duties happened, one evening, to take me to a *pwe* that was being given on the edge of the *maidan*. It was quite a second-rate show – clod-hopping actors and a tin-pot band. I have no objection to a good performance, with a star like Ma Twe Gale and good clowns, but nothing would have taken me to see these jungle wallahs if it hadn't been that I had to keep a special eye on one or two of the local gentry who made it a business to frequent gatherings of this kind for purposes of their own. Of these our friend Ma E was one. I saw her on this occasion, flitting hither and thither, smirking and bedizened, flaunting it (such was her impudence!) under the wing of the sulky Khattak Shah himself. The pair of them mixed with the crowd outside the dancing shed and one could hear the woman's shrill laughter above the din of the music, for all she tried to stuff her silk scarf into her mouth to smother the

GREEN SANDALS

sound of it. So long as I was in their neighbourhood there was nothing suspicious in their movements, but I have no doubt that orders were being booked all the time for opium and *ganja* and cocaine, even though the stuff didn't actually pass from hand to hand then and there.

Peering in to get a glimpse of the performance, I was a little surprised to see a couple of Europeans perched on chairs where the pack was thickest — looking very hot and conspicuous in the lamplight in white mess jackets. One of them was Staynes, the other a smug, bald-pated fellow called Wheeler, also in Blackburns'. I did not speak to them. I had no wish to draw attention to myself, but, hovering on the fringe of the crowd in the darkness, I kept an eye on them, and, when, having had enough of the show (which was pretty soon, for they couldn't be expected to understand much of what was going on on the stage), they strolled out of the place, I followed them with a glance. Then it was that I learnt that they were both acquainted with Ma E, who sidled up towards them immediately they were clear of the building. Khattak Shah followed her — a great hulking bearded beast — and chose, most tactlessly, to hang glowering around in the vicinity. For the moment, I could see, the woman would have given a good deal to be rid of the Mussulman. She wished to figure in the eyes of all and sundry as the sprightly unattached lady, and the sight of that black scowling face at her elbow was enough to choke off the most ardent of young men. If it hadn't been for Khattak Shah I conceive Staynes would have spread himself

GREEN SANDALS

even more than he did. As it was, he nodded familiarly to Ma E, waited for her to come close, offered her – as I live! – a cigarette and, there in the full lamp flare, exchanged at least half a dozen sentences with her in a conspirator's undertone, looking this way and that, before he followed Wheeler away out of the crowd. It was clearly not the first time they had met and talked. There was a complete understanding between them.

I had no hesitation in calling this hob-nobbing with the enemy a dirty trick on the young man's part. At the same time even now I had no definite proof that he was making deliberate use of the woman to undermine Mrs. Brendish's happiness, and so I gave him a few more yards of rope and decided for a further space to wait and watch.

And while I waited, watching, facts began to come to my knowledge which showed that a financial as well as a conjugal catastrophe was threatening the Brendishes and I found myself wondering anxiously whether, if its crash brought Brendish to his senses in time, the money trouble might not in the end prove a blessing in disguise.

Brendish was indubitably in very low water. I had no concern with the business life of Mingin, but those who knew the ropes told me that the gawk, who had some skill at any rate in piece goods, had been induced to dabble in minerals – a line in which he was a child – with the result that he had let himself in to the tune of a lakh or something near it. Trouble had hardly touched the man before his creditors began swarming about him like vultures

GREEN SANDALS

round a kill in the jungle, and in his extremity the fool had done the incredibly rash thing of borrowing money from the Chetties. Personally, I should have thought that the other white firms in Mingin oughtn't to have allowed it. They might, to avoid a scandal in that small European community, have easily butted in, backed a bill or two and helped Brendish tide over the rush. I should have helped him myself if I had had the means, and I thought the merchants would too, but that wasn't a bit how they looked at it. It meant, I suppose, to them merely an arrangement for temporarily prolonging the life of one who was an awkward competitor as well as (and this was where the shoe really pinched) a nasty litigious crank. If the man had had any social gifts whatever, I make bold to say that he would have found a crony who, for old sake's sake, was willing to risk a few thousand rupees, but Brendish was never a friend-maker and gave most of his acquaintances the impression that he would sooner see himself damned than apply to them for help. And so the money-lenders had their innings and proceeded, after the manner of their kind, to put on the screw.

Allagappa was the Chetty to whom, in his madness, Brendish had gone when his credit among the Europeans had petered out. He was an evil-looking devil, who lived in a deep-verandahed lime-washed house in that part of the business quarter of the town known locally as Pabedan — just off the Salween Road. I had known him in my youthful days in Mingin. He had then been a puffy, capable man

GREEN SANDALS

of thirty or thereabouts, with a bullet-head like a negro prize-fighter's. In these latter days he was not so well filled out. His paunch had become wrinkled, what hair he showed on his shaven poll was grizzled, and he had fewer teeth to chew his betel with.

At their best Chetties are not altogether nice-looking people. The word 'ogre' describes a good many of them fairly. I remember a somewhat nervous new-comer from Europe literally shrieking out on being confronted with Allagappa as she stepped out of her *gharry* in the bazaar. The foolish woman said he looked exactly as if he had not quite finished eating a baby raw. She was obviously new to betel-chewing. As a matter of fact, except when actually engaged in the extraction of interest, I believe Allagappa was not at all an unpleasant old gentleman. His word was his bond, he paid his taxes regularly, I believe his religious piety was an example to the whole of the Pabedan quarter. Business with him, however, was business. When finally satisfied that the only way to get his money out of Brendish was by recourse to the courts, he put the necessary pressure on quite ruthlessly; got his decree and, without further ado, took out execution.

Many natives would have had some compunction about applying the full rigours of the law in the case of a European. Not so Allagappa. There was his pound of flesh. He wanted it and he was going to get it from somebody – he did not care a button from whom – thereby, by the same token, showing a great advance on Shylock. There was nothing of the shifty, plausible Dravidian about him. He was

GREEN SANDALS

neither profuse nor apologetic. He did not pretend to be a pauper (it was no use his trying!), but he could not afford to lose a lakh – or half a lakh, or whatever it was – and he let you know it.

On one occasion I saw and spoke to him in my office. He had come to interview me about some matter of his own quite unconnected with Brendish. All Mingin was ringing, however, with Brendish's case, and though it was none of my business, I thought to tackle my visitor discreetly after we had finished with the concern that had brought him inside my doors.

'I say, Allagappa, I hear you've got a decree against Brendish Sahib,' said I.

There was a kind of sulky strength latent in his coarse black face. He was one of the wealthiest men in Mingin and he stood there by the office door, refusing a chair, with nothing but his white cotton *dhoti* on him. He might almost, for the look of him, have been a Municipal coolie. 'The money was due,' was all he said, in quite passable Hindustani. His own language was Tamil.

'And you've applied for execution, I hear,' I went on.

He licked his red lips and signified assent.

I thought of Mrs. Brendish, and for her sake swallowed my pride and probed him a little further. 'But you aren't going to be hard on him, are you?' I said, and I believe I grinned rather inanely, a thing I was not accustomed to do to any native.

'I shall be no harder on him than his own people, the *Sahiblog*, are,' he replied.

GREEN SANDALS

'He owes the *Sahiblog* nothing,' I observed.

'They have taken good care of that!' was his rejoinder. 'They let him come to me. If they are not satisfied, let them take over his debts and clear him. The amount is small.'

'I suppose you call a lakh a small amount!' I cried.

'It is less than a lakh,' he said. 'I only ask for my rights. I have given him plenty of time.'

'Time!' I echoed. 'Look here, Allagappa, what have you been making out of him in the way of interest all that time?'

He held out his black hand and wagged it vigorously from the wrist at me. 'My interest is lower than any Burman's,' he assured me indignantly – and I believe also, with absolute truth. 'Ask anyone in the bazaar!' he went on. 'I had to take risks. Bren-dish Sahib would not have come to me if he could have got better terms elsewhere.'

There was something in all this, no doubt, and for a while I sat and gnawed at my cheroot, at a loss for words.

'Are you or are you not going to sell him up?' I asked bluntly at last.

For once the lowering beetle-browed fellow allowed himself a grinning gibe. 'Will you pay for him, Sahib?' he inquired.

'I?' I returned. 'What are you talking about, Allagappa. I am a poor man!' and at this he showed his red-rimmed tusks again and gave the deprecating incredulous head-wag, with which all natives meet the suggestion that the European official is not rich

GREEN SANDALS

beyond the dreams of avarice. In the case of most the belief that we all do nothing but shake the pagoda tree is, I expect, more or less genuine. Allagappa, of course, knew better. Still, he kept it up.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was not so very long after this that events in this unforgettable business of Brendish's came to a head. I had been invited to dine at the Bairds' but had been unable to accept, having asked some men to dinner that night myself, and being only too ready to jump at the excuse, inasmuch as the Bairds' banquet had had all the premonitory symptoms of a *burra khana* — the kind of function I abominate.

My guests left fairly early. I had heard some of Bairds' victims driving home past the house about the same time. It was between eleven and twelve o'clock. The night was fine and moonlit, but far from cool. I was beginning to undress for bed in the upper verandah into which little puffs of breeze had at last begun to come, when I heard rapid footsteps in the compound below. A European peered up and cried out in rather a rasping voice, 'Are you there, Venne?' and, looking down, I saw the light shining on a bald head.

'Come up, friend, whoever you are,' I called out, and he came upstairs, two steps at a time, as though the thermometer had been a mere seventy, instead of standing, as it did, at eighty-two or thereabouts. He was sweating like a pig, bare-headed, with a jacket over his pyjama suit. It was Priestley, the Civil Surgeon.

'What's up?' I inquired, as he stood, panting lustily, in front of me.

He dabbed with his sleeve at the drops on his forehead. 'Brendish is dead!' he said.

GREEN SANDALS

My heart raced at the suddenness of it. I had no time then to see visions I might have seen if the thing had come more gradually. I only remember feeling glad that I had never definitely wished Brendish dead before this. It seemed to clear my conscience. 'Good Lord!' I cried, trying to make up by vehemence of utterance for any lack of audible regret in my voice. 'When did he die, Priestley? I didn't even know he was ill!'

'He wasn't ill,' said Priestley. 'At least he never called me in. He has taken something – well, something that wasn't over good for him, I judge.' He spoke, and I could see him wrinkle his nose.

'It wasn't cholera, was it?' I cried. 'You've seen him, then, have you?'

'I should rather think I had,' he declared. 'They sent for me *ek dum*. No, it isn't cholera. It looks to me rather as if he had been –'

He pulled himself up short. 'It's no use anticipating the post-mortem,' he went on in a more cautious tone. 'There'll have to be a post-mortem, you know.'

I had begun by that time to get into my discarded clothes. 'Post mortem, by Jove!' I cried, pricking up my ears. This seemed to come more or less into my province. 'Where is he now?' I asked.

'In his house,' he said. 'In a chair – as they showed him to me – I didn't want to move anything. By God, Venne, it's a nasty-looking business. He was all right this afternoon. I saw him driving up from office.'

'You don't say so!' I cried. 'It's lucky in that case that they got hold of you!'

GREEN SANDALS

I could see by his mouth that he did not share my opinion in the least, and, as I stared at him, I told myself that in that case he ought to be more open with me. 'Blow the post-mortem!' I said. 'If you think there's been foul play – suicide, or anything of that sort – I'm the man to be told. What do you think it is?'

'I think it's poison,' said he.

'Poison!' I echoed. 'Did they have anything like tinned asparagus at the Bairds?' Ghastly stuff, that!

'He wasn't at the Bairds,' cried Priestley. 'He dined alone at home. They can't be sure what he ate. I want to have him taken to the mortuary sharp – to-night as ever is – eh, Venne? It seems to me you ought to see the place before anyone else does. Do you mind going round there with me?'

'Mind? It's what I'm here for!' I said.

One of my orderlies was below. I shouted down the stairs to him and told him to order my trap. Then I turned to Priestley again. 'Is Mrs. Brendish there?' I asked.

'Yes,' he replied. 'And young Staynes too.'

I felt suddenly furious. 'What's Staynes doing there at this time of night?' I demanded.

He treated me to a meaning glance and followed it up with an even more meaning shrug. 'I don't know,' he returned, and to my lasting disquiet, added, 'Didn't I tell you it was a nasty business?'

I said, 'Can't they tell you anything?'

'It all happened while they were away – or so at any rate they said,' was his reply, and his jaw drooped disconsolately.

GREEN SANDALS

It struck me that he was taking a very gloomy view of what was possibly a quite straightforward case. 'Poison . . . poison!' I murmured to myself, turning it over as we went downstairs together to wait for the trap in the lower verandah. 'He has been in trouble, poor beggar!' I observed when we reached the bottom of the steps. 'I was talking to the Chetty about it not so very long ago. Don't you think it can have been suicide?'

Said he, 'Mrs. Brendish doesn't think so.'

'Ah!' I cried. 'What does she say?'

'She? . . . Mrs. Brendish?' he returned. 'You had better hear what she has got to say herself.'

I thought he was probably right here. I did not press him. There was only one thing more I wanted to be told. I asked, 'Does she know I'm coming?'

'She ought to,' he muttered.

It was not long before a sleepy syce brought my trap round, yawning hideously. Priestley and I got in together without a word. My old grey started off resignedly through the steamy night. The cart lamps flung strange shadows on the roadside trees, laid bare odd fantastic shapes lurking among the tree trunks, outlined the white of compound gates that jumped forward into sight and were gone. The wheels purred through the dust. The harness jingled a heady accompaniment to my thoughts. I began to have my visions now with a vengeance and the centre figure in them all was Mrs. Brendish, very tall in her widow's weeds, very pale and very pensive, but free, unshackled – and needing my aid. It was a wonderful experience! A kind of grim prescience

GREEN SANDALS

told me that she and I were in for a hell of a time, that she would need every ounce of help I could give her, but through it all I found myself murmuring at intervals, 'It's worth it! . . . Oh, rather! It's worth it!'

Only once did Priestley's voice reach me during the drive. That was when the ever-moving lamp flare lit up the magpie-like rig of a European in evening dress whom we crossed on the road footing it dejectedly in the direction of the ridge.

'That's Staynes going home,' said Priestley. 'The young blighter!'

I looked back over my shoulder at the retreating figure. 'Thank Heaven!' I remember saying to myself. I couldn't say what a relief it was to know we were quit of him. Mrs. Brendish would now, presumably, be alone with the body.

Pulling up under the Brendishes' porch, I sprang out and handed the reins quickly to my companion in accordance with a plan I had been evolving as I drove. 'Look here, Priestley,' I said, 'will you take the trap on to the hospital and get them to fetch a litter here for the body.'

He stared hard at me. He had evidently expected me to require his presence at the coming interview. He was about to urge some other arrangement, but, when he saw my face, he appeared, like a sensible man, to think better of it, and with a curt 'Make it so!' shortened the reins and drove off into the darkness.

The moon had just set. As I groped my way up the stairs I had nothing to guide me except a dim

GREEN SANDALS

light I could see burning beyond the upper landing. I did not mind who was present when I saw Brendish's body, but Mrs. Brendish I was determined to see alone. It is strange, but even at that early stage of events I had a kind of idea that I ought to protect her from herself.

I had had plenty to do with dead bodies in my time, and when it came to the point and I had blundered out of the gloom into the half light of a narrow little room on the upper floor, I barely cast a second glance at what lay huddled there in the chair with its face to the window. I had made up my mind beforehand what a pasty-faced man like Brendish would look like when the end came, and I was not far wrong. Brendish was dead, with all his imperfections on him, and had, for good or ill, become, in a manner of speaking, Priestley's job. What I was concerned with was what Brendish had left behind, and particularly with the woman who stood there under the flickering wall lamp against which night insects were dashing themselves persistently.

She, at any rate, was quite different from what my imagination had prepared me for. She was in evening dress – with bare white arms – wide-eyed, rapt, but, somehow, not in the least pitiful, not looking, I am bound to confess, much as if she had need of me.

She was facing me as I came in – on the farther side of the body. She looked as though she had been standing there for hours. I had a feeling that if I had turned round and gone off then and there and come back in the grey of the dawn, I should have

GREEN SANDALS

found her exactly as she stood then – motionless, looking straight at the wall behind me, where an old jacket of Brendish's hung. A Madrasi servant was just visible in the gloom near her. I gathered that she had been expecting me and that the man had been told to wait till I came, for as I stepped in he disappeared and I could hear his bare feet pattering softly down the stairs.

She did not turn her head to look at me. She kept her gaze fixed on the wall and for a few seconds she gave me the idea that it was not me, after all she had been waiting for. When, however, she spoke, it was to say in a strained, dead voice, 'Nothing has been touched. Absolutely nothing.'

I believe I had already begun to stammer out some conventional expressions of condolence, but she cut me short. 'You'll want to look at everything, I expect,' said she.

Something told me that it was odious for her to have me arriving like this – to pry, to investigate, to question. It couldn't be helped! I had to go through with it, hoping to be able to show her my good will as I went along.

'Everything's exactly as it was,' she went on, as though determined to keep things on a strictly official footing. 'I suppose Major Priestley has told you everything.'

'That he hasn't,' I declared. 'When did it all happen?'

'While I was away dining at the Bairds,' she said. She drew a deep breath and plunged into her account. 'It was latish,' she went on. 'No, perhaps

GREEN SANDALS

not so very late. . . . I came upstairs to him. . . . I could see him – just his head and arm – these bits here – in the distance, in the lamplight, through the *pardah*. . . . I thought he was asleep then. After that I heard some one moving in the dark near where he was.'

'In the room?' I asked.

She shook her head. 'No. Out in the verandah, but not far off. . . . I saw a woman . . . in a white jacket . . . a Burmese woman . . . quite small . . . Ma E, it was. . . . You know her. . . . You spoke to me about her once.'

For a moment she raised her clasped hands to the level of her chin and I saw her forehead ruffle suddenly in the lamplight. 'Ah, why didn't I? –' she called out and broke off, and expelling vain regrets, with a deep breath went on, 'I *had* forbidden her the house though!' she assured me. 'She wasn't allowed inside. And there she was! . . . She ran off downstairs when she heard me coming after her.'

'Why did you let her go?' I demanded in a futile sort of way.

'I thought nothing very much of it at the time,' said she. 'I never dreamt it was anything like *this*! . . . It was only later, when I came to speak to him, that I found – well . . . there . . . you see! . . . And then I called Mr. Staynes.'

'Staynes! What on earth was he . . . ?' I began, but stopped myself before the sentence was finished. Staynes was always like a red rag to a bull to me, but Staynes, after all, was just a measly detail. I gulped my feelings down. 'Yes, and then?' I said.

GREEN SANDALS

'Well,' she said, 'he called Major Priestley and he came over here. He was wonderfully quick. . . . Is he going to take the body away, Mr. Venne?'

'Yes, he has gone to the hospital for a *dooly*,' I made answer. 'But look here, can't the servants tell you anything of what happened while you were away?'

'Hardly a thing,' she said. 'They were away themselves all the time in their go-downs. The Madrasi boy says Oswald had his dinner by himself. . . . Not that he had anything to speak of. He seems to have just pecked at the things – chicken cutlets and caramel custard. . . . No, nothing tinned! It can't have been anything he ate then. . . . Then, after dinner, he came upstairs. . . . They – the servants, you know – heard him go up about ten o'clock. . . . He was very quiet. They all went off to their go-downs. No one was quite close by, but they were all within hail. They would have heard any suspicious noise.'

'And you think it was Ma E who did it?' I asked.

She pulled at her fingers in a tortured sort of way. 'I don't see who else it *can* have been!' she whispered. 'There she was, you see – in a white jacket – tip-toeing along.'

'Why didn't the servants see or hear her?' I demanded. Then, without waiting for her to answer, I went on. 'She sleeps in the compound, doesn't she?' said I. 'Is she in her go-down now?'

'David says not,' she replied. 'They tell me she hasn't been seen about the place for days now. Oh no, she won't be in the compound. She may be miles

GREEN SANDALS

away by this time. It's no use looking for her on the premises.'

Something in her assurance gave me a dull sense of anxiety. 'You're sure?' I murmured testingly.

'Absolutely sure,' said she.

There followed on these words of hers a silence. For the first time I took my eyes off her and looked down at the corpse posed there in the chair between us. I have known faces to be transfigured by death, but poor old Brendish's uncouth trumpery features were quite incapable of reacting with dignity to the supreme ordeal. I made, I remember, some show of examining the body for marks of violence, for obviously it seemed absurd trying to fit a furtive night visit like Ma E's into any deliberate scheme of poisoning. There were no external signs of foul play, however, and presently I found myself staring fixedly again at the woman, standing there very white. I tried to picture what an unprejudiced outsider would have made of her strange story, and all the time there lay on my vitals something that didn't amount to a suspicion, but that might, I could see, at a touch develop into one. It was like a lump of lead, and it was the feeling that only quick and resolute action could dispel it that made me, a moment later, cry out, as I did, 'Mrs. Brendish, why did you let Staynes go off like that?'

CHAPTER XIX

I HAD suddenly discovered that I wanted some one to turn on and rend. Clearly I couldn't rend Mrs. Brendish, and the only person I could with good cause have turned on was absent. Staynes, I discovered, was not such a measly detail after all. It was infamous that he shouldn't be there, facing the music alongside of Mrs. Brendish! Why had the young cur been allowed to skulk off home? Surely it was his business to show how it was he had been on the spot at that hour of the night! In a vague but disturbing way his presence on the scene seemed inextricably bound up with the fact that there was a dead body lolling in the chair between Mrs. Brendish and me.

For a few seconds she had no reply ready, and next moment I found myself calling out in a high, petulant voice, 'I can't think why you didn't make him stay?'

Her rejoinder, when it did come, was hushed and remonstrating, as though she were reasoning with a headstrong child. 'There was nothing for him to stop for,' she explained. 'I made him go. . . . He knew nothing. He was downstairs till I called him up to look at Oswald.' Then she took me by surprise by crying out all at once, with a little throaty break in her voice, 'Don't look at me like that, Mr. Venne! Whoever's guilty of this, he isn't!'

It worried me that she should be so shrinkingly quick to shield young Staynes. 'I'm not suggesting that anyone is guilty of anything,' I muttered. 'It

GREEN SANDALS

may have been no outsider's work at all. You don't think, I suppose, that your husband – you know – can have done it himself?"

I watched her face anxiously and just when, in spite of what Priestley had said, I expected her to clutch at this as at the least revolting solution, she cast my suggestion back at me with a 'Never! Never! Why should he?'

"There were money troubles, weren't there?" I hinted.

"Not enough for *that*!" she exclaimed. "No, don't think of it. Never, I'm sure . . . at any rate not without –"

She had put one hand to her mouth, covering a corner of it, and her big eyes had all at once begun scanning the room as though in search of something. 'I've hunted everywhere!' she assured me earnestly. 'If it was . . . If it was as you say . . . But no – surely he would never have done *that* without leaving some kind of message for me! There's nothing, absolutely nothing!'

Her eyes, feverishly peering, turned from their vain task and fixed themselves upon me. "They generally leave some kind of message, don't they?" she demanded wanly, looking at me as though my police calling had made me an authority on suicides. 'I've looked everywhere, high and low. Not a scrap of paper anywhere. It wouldn't have been like him to leave no message. Major Priestley seemed to suggest that it might have been something he had eaten or drunk. . . . I told you what he had for dinner, didn't I? Such wholesome things! If he had taken

GREEN SANDALS

it intentionally, there would have been something to show, but there's no glass or anything. Who's to have taken it away if it was there?"

"Who, indeed?" I echoed. I stepped round the chair where Brendish sat with drooping head – giving one, with his drawn mouth and protruding teeth, the odd idea of wanting to apologize for all the trouble he was giving. There was a small occasional table on the farther side of the corpse. Taking the wall lamp from where it hung on a nail I held it close to the table top. At one corner of the surface of polished wood there was a faint, damp, semi-circular mark which suggested that a tumbler or cup had recently been placed there.

"There has been something like a glass here," I said. "Does anyone know where it has gone to?" She peered down at the table. Then she lifted her eyes. "David knows nothing," she said. "No one has been here for hours. The ayah says the same. If anyone –"

"I shall want to examine all the servants tomorrow!" I exclaimed suddenly.

"Very well," she returned, and took up her interrupted sentence again. "If anyone took it away it *must* have been –"

"Ma E, you think?" said I, for she had stopped, this time entirely on her own account.

She nodded and clutched her throat, and somehow I hated to see her do that.

"You're sure it was Ma E you saw?" I asked.

Again she nodded, adding after a breath or two, "Absolutely certain. Who else can it have been?"

GREEN SANDALS

I turned slowly from her and, lamp in hand, made a deliberate circuit of the room. There was a jail-made almirah in one corner, a camp stretcher with a flimsy mosquito net near the door, a clothes rack with jackets hanging on it like a string of limp male-factors on gibbets, a row of boots ranged on the floor against the wall, shaving tackle on a small dressing-table, a wash-stand. By rights, I judged, there should have been a tooth-water tumbler on the wash-stand. As a matter of fact there was none.

I pointed this out to Mrs. Brendish and she withdrew her glance from vacancy and expressed agreement with my view. 'Of course there should be one — a little fluted one,' she murmured.

'What room is that in there?' I asked, and pointed to the curtained door I had just come through.

'That's my bedroom,' she said.

'I should like to have a look in there,' I said.

'Of course. Do,' was her reply.

Still carrying the lamp, I walked from point to point round the bedroom, oddly thrilled, as any bachelor would have been by the sense of intrusion into this sanctum, all littered with feminine chattels. I glanced at this and that, satisfied myself that there was no superfluous tumbler in the room, but otherwise found nothing to help me.

In a very short time I rejoined Mrs. Brendish by the body. 'Which is his bathroom?' I asked, and she indicated one of the other *purdahs*.

I pushed the hanging aside and found myself in a rather small bathroom with wooden walls and plank flooring. A wooden tub, hooped with iron, stood on

GREEN SANDALS

the usual raised platform of concrete. There were two or three big brown earthenware water jars close to the tub, and the cement showed fresh wet splashes radiating out as proof that water had been taken from one of the jars comparatively recently.

I moved the lamp hither and thither and the shadows of the jars swayed this way and that, blackly. My eye was caught by a tumbler of coarse glass that stood on a ledge immediately above the bath. On picking it up I discovered that its fluted sides were beaded with moisture. The wood-work on which it was standing, too, was damp to the touch. The night was hot enough to make it certain that not much more than an hour could have elapsed since the tumbler had been placed, all wet, where it was.

I took the thing up carefully, using my handkerchief and not my bare hand to lift it, and carried it in to Mrs. Brendish. It seemed a find of some importance.

'Is this his tumbler?' I asked.

It is marvellous how foolish little things stick in one's memory. I recollect that, as I stood there, waiting for her reply, with the late owner of the tumbler there between us, I wondered whether I ought not properly to have said, '*Was* this his tumbler?' Somehow the other didn't seem quite right.

'Let me look at it,' she said. She held out her hand to take the glass from me. 'Look out!' I cried. 'Flat on your hand, please. There may be finger-marks on the sides.'

She took it from me, flat on her hand. 'It must

GREEN SANDALS

have been handled while it was wet,' she observed. 'Wet! Wet! Don't you see? It can't possibly have shown any finger-marks. Look!' and she deliberately pressed her finger on the edge and as deliberately withdrew it to show me the result. 'Can you see anything?' she demanded.

'Not in this light,' I replied. I took the glass from her and faced her, breathing quickly. 'You've spoilt it all now!' I declared. 'Why did you do that, Mrs. Brendish?'

'To show you it was no good looking for fingerprints on the thing,' she said.

I stood there, tumbler in hand, covering her with my eye with again that leaden feeling I had experienced once before – when she had protested so confidently that it was no use looking for Ma E on the premises. One could almost imagine that she was determined that the wet tumbler should tell no tales! . . . What did it all mean?

There was no time then, however, for dark speculation. Footsteps could be heard ringing on the cement of the verandah on the ground floor. Hushed voices sounded at the bottom of the stairs. There was a rhythmic creak, as though several persons were ascending, and almost at the same time David, the Madras boy, pulled back the *pardah* over the door into the bedroom and peered officiously in.

'They done bring a *dooly* from the hospital, ma'am,' he announced.

'Is Major Priestley there, boy?' I asked, and, even as I spoke, the Civil Surgeon's head appeared in the doorway behind David's.

GREEN SANDALS

He came in without a word. He looked slowly round him and nodded once in my direction as much as to say he was taking over charge of affairs from me. Stepping to the door again, still silent, he beckoned. The creaking came nearer and two Indians, apparently hospital servants, entered with a stretcher. To the sound of soft grunts and pants the long ungovernable body was hoisted out of the chair on to the litter. Mrs. Brendish, watching the operations from under her heavy eyebrows, made no offer to help. Only once did she speak.

'Are you going to bring him back again here afterwards?' she whispered.

'That depends,' said Priestley, in the same hushed tone.

Something in his voice troubled me beyond measure. I seemed to hear in it the dim far-off suggestion of a threat. It was much as though he were asking what would be the good of bringing a corpse back to a house from which the mistress had been compulsorily removed!

He struck the same note of suspicion — Priestley did — a minute or two later, when, having come downstairs together with the body into the lower verandah, he and I stood opposite each other on the steps while a momentary halt was being called to allow of the carriers to adjust their burden to their liking. I shall always remember the picture. Brendish's remains lay stark on the litter. The ghostly glimmer from a hurricane lantern that David was holding unsteadily quivered here and there, now

GREEN SANDALS

playing on the rigid outlines of the dead man, now lighting up Priestley's shining forehead. From the outer darkness came the sound of my pony fretting at his bit in the trap that waited for me behind the black line of *hibiscus* bushes.

He was a tall man — Priestley — almost as tall as Brendish himself, and standing as he did a step higher than I, he had to look down at me and I up at him. Something impelled us to exchange one long inquiring glance while the *dooly* bearers whispered and fussed over the body. Our eyes met with a motion of challenge, and though we said nothing, a great deal seemed to have passed between us before his eyebrows stopped going up and down. All the time we were asking each other silent, outrageous questions, and assuring each other that we had no answers for them. I remembered he had purposely told me as little as possible at our last interview. Now he as good as asked me whether I didn't commend his reticence. Presently, as I watched his face, the puckers at each corner of his mouth, bulging in the lamplight, had the odd effect, as they gathered, of appearing to drive the middle of his lips up into his nose and, staring me through and through, he raised his palms and turned them outwards with a shrug of dismayed impotence.

Just for a moment he actually looked as if he wanted to clothe that helpless gesture in words of some sort. I could see, however, that on second thoughts he decided to leave it till after the operating knife had made matters a little clearer. Here, no doubt, he was wise. After all, there was the off

GREEN SANDALS

chance of the post-mortem dissipating all our morbid imaginings.

I expect it was this feeling that judgment had better be suspended which made him refuse my offer of a lift to the hospital. Driving together we couldn't have avoided a further exchange of views.

'You get off to bed, my bird,' he said. 'Don't you bother about me. It's really only a step.'

'I'm not bothering,' I assured him, but I confess I was mightily relieved when he persisted in his refusal and stepped off after the *dooly* bearers into the night.

Bed was obviously the place for me and for all good citizens and yet, after he had gone, I stood rooted to the spot, while David fidgeted behind me in a futile exasperating way with the hurricane lantern until I bade him be off and send the ayah up to his mistress.

There was dead silence after his departure. The *dooly* had creaked away into the darkness that lay below the *padauk* trees. Even the bats and insects seemed to have gone to rest. Then softly from above came a muffled sound that made my breath scamper and my throat twitch unsteadily.

After all her agonized self-restraint, Mrs. Brendish's feelings had at last found vent upstairs in an altogether piteous fit of sobbing.

I stood irresolute, torn hellishly. It was as though two ravening beasts had hold of me and were tugging in opposition. I felt a nameless cur standing there listening to that choking cry and doing nothing. I would have given the world to be able to go upstairs to that poor sobbing soul and comfort her. I might have taken her by the hand, I might have

GREEN SANDALS

assured her that her interests were mine, that my one desire was to serve her, that she must never think herself friendless. I felt there was nothing I would not have done to stop that low, insistent, gulping sound. God knows I should have gone up to her and said my say if those poisonous doubts of mine, with their opposing tug, had not made a weak-kneed poltroon of me.

If once I had been able to convince myself that Ma E had actually been up with Brendish before Mrs. Brendish came back from the Bairds' I should have been able to say the right word and do the right thing. But the conviction was not there. I was literally frightened lest, if I went up to her, Mrs. Brendish should, by some gesture or some word, deepen my suspicions, and so, finally, after two minutes' torture, I turned, with an aching heart but ears resolutely shut, got into my waiting dog-cart and drove away.

Once out of the sound of that heart-breaking cry – away from the stifling *padauk* trees and skirting the *maidan*, I began to pull myself together and to recognize that in not going up to comfort Mrs. Brendish I had acted as a good police officer should. It was most essential that I should approach the matter dispassionately, without fear or favour, not paying any heed at this stage to unbalanced outpourings which might convey a wrong – an unfair – impression of guilt.

Assuming that I could clear my mind of Mrs. Brendish, the matter was, so far as it went, perfectly straightforward. Ma E had been indicated as the

GREEN SANDALS

cause of Brendish's death. The burden of proving her innocence lay obviously upon her. This being so, it didn't seem fair, it didn't seem proper, that I should listen just then to anything that might influence my mind in an opposite direction. I flattered myself that I had a nose that could detect a red herring. Look at facts. Ma E was a frequenter of the house, a known trafficker in drugs, an associate of all the blackguards in Mingin. The more I thought about it, with the night breeze cooling my fevered brow, the clearer it became that there was a strong *prima facie* case against Ma E. She might be able to clear herself – who was I to gainsay it? – but till she had cleared herself, it would be most ill-judged to confuse the issue by looking around for another malefactor. Moreover, even if Ma E succeeded in establishing her innocence, why should I (of all people!) try and fix on Mrs. Brendish as an alternative scapegoat? There were plenty of other theories to explore!

In any case, there was the result of the post-mortem to wait for.

By the time I reached home, where a sleepy orderly was sitting up for me, I had made one really very sound resolve. I should go into the case myself. I should not depute the investigation to a subordinate. There were points about it too delicate to be left to any bungling understrapper – particularly a Burman or a native of India. There was no need to wash more European linen in public than was absolutely necessary. Besides, I wanted Mrs. Brendish to have perfectly fair play, so that if my half-formed doubts

GREEN SANDALS

proved in the end to be pure moonshine, as no doubt they were, not a stone should be left unturned to prove her innocence.

I suddenly found myself wishing that Priestley hadn't known such a lot about the business. I had a kind of fear that he might not be quite so fair to Mrs. Brendish as he ought to!

CHAPTER XX

IN furtherance of the above resolve, I left soon after daybreak next day for the Brendishes' bungalow. It was a fairish cold weather morning. A white mist shrouded the mango trees and the temperature was bearable and promised to keep reasonable for another hour at least. I had no expectation of seeing Mrs. Brendish at this hour of the day, but I did want to make sure of being first on the field of investigation.

It was well that I was on the spot betimes. Stepping into the Brendishes' compound by a side gate, I was a little exercised by the sight of a figure in police uniform making through the mist with purposeful directness for the servants' go-downs at the far corner. It proved to be one of my Burman subordinates, Shwe Lu by name. His glance roved to the right and left and presently the sight of me caused him, without halting, to swerve ceremoniously in my direction, fingering the brass buttons of his khaki tunic. He halted opposite to me, brought his heels together and saluted.

'What are you doing here, Shwe Lu?' I inquired.

He was a small, upright, deep-breathing young man with coarse black hair – not very short – and a complexion of the kind that they call 'wheaten' in police reports.

'Sir,' he declared, 'first information is arrived from hospital very early that there is a sudden accidental death of European gentleman – Mr. Brendish, sir.' He paused, open-mouthed, waiting for me to absorb the intimation.

GREEN SANDALS

I nodded and he went on. 'I am very sorry, sir, to report it. It is a great pity for Mingin. But also, if any suspicions, I wish to find out all details and whether Section 174 of the Code applying or no.' He lowered his voice to the pitch of confidence and glanced backwards over his shoulder. 'There is one bad character residing in this compound,' he informed me. 'She lives in touch-and-go fashion and quite without her husband's agreement. Therefore on that account I have come quickly to investigate.'

I must confess I was a little put out by the appearance on the scene of this inconveniently early bird, but I swallowed my feelings. 'That's all right, Shwe Lu,' I declared heartily, 'I know about the case.'

'Yes, sir.' He blinked eagerly at me, his initiative suddenly at an end. He had become a passive instrument, waiting for the touch of the superior's hand.

'You were quite right to come here sharp,' I went on. 'However, as a matter of fact, I came round here about the case last night myself.'

'Last night, sir,' he repeated affirmatively as though thereby stamping the fact for all time on his memory. 'Then undoubtedly the servants already been examined.'

'Not yet,' I said. 'I'm going to have a word with them now.'

His face brightened. 'And I shall call two residents in under Section 174?' he inquired.

'Not yet,' I said, and heard him draw a deep regretful breath. I turned and gazed around me. After last night's thrill I had expected to find the place

GREEN SANDALS

alive with curious gossip-mongers, but at first sight the compound seemed deserted. There was no sweeper plying his broom, no *pani wallah* engaged with kerosene oil tins at the well. Brendish's pony poked his nose out of the stable with an air of waiting impatiently for the syce who should bring him his early feed of gram. But, as I stood and looked, life began to show among the trunks of the mango trees. A form in a white *pagri* appeared at the door of one of the go-downs, cast a quick glance in our direction and vanished into a clump of plantains, and a moment later more figures began to emerge from heaven knows where and to scatter unostentatiously — all, to outward seeming, too intent on their domestic duties to be aware of my presence.

For the moment I did not waste my time on these stragglers. 'Get hold of the Madrasi butler first, Shwe Lu,' I ordered. 'Hang on to him like grim death. Bring him to me in about ten minutes' time. You'll find me over there in the *bawarchi khana*.'

Shwe Lu saluted again and stalked, very upright, towards the servants' go-downs. I, for my part, made for the cook-house, a smoke-grimed erection, roofed with corrugated iron and connected by a covered way with the Brendishes' bungalow. It was soon clear where the gathering ground of the clans was, for, as I approached the building, there was a furtive hushed stampede of brown visitors through the open door. Three or four of the assembled gossips were not able to get out in time. I found them ranged sheepishly round the walls of the kitchen, in the centre of which, in an atmosphere of

GREEN SANDALS

onions and wood smoke, stood San Dun, the Brendishes' cook, peeling potatoes with an air of martyred detachment.

I cleared the place with brutal expedition – San Dun, with his mouth open, peeling the while, and, when we were alone together, I addressed myself to Ma E's husband.

'Where's your wife?' I inquired.

I spoke in Burmese, for, though San Dun doubtless had some small store of kitchen English, I was resolved that he should have no excuse for prevarication later on the score that he had been interrogated in a language that was not his own.

He was evidently quite prepared to have this question thrust upon him for, before the words were out of my mouth, he had composed his pock-marked features into a stare of puzzled wonder and had brought out a questioning bleat of '*Paya?*'

'Ma E! Ma E!' I cried impatiently. 'Where is she, fool?'

He might, for all his face told, have been a guileless bachelor. 'Ma E!' he echoed, with a far-away look in his eyes and a cocking of his black head, as though the name, when he came to think of it, struck a familiar chord. Then, grudgingly, seeing there was no help for it, he muttered, 'She is not here.'

'I can see that for myself,' I retorted. 'But where is she?'

'I don't know,' he returned, and fiddled sulkily with his kitchen knife.

'When did you see her last?' I demanded.

GREEN SANDALS

He became all at once very communicative. 'I have not seen her for a long time,' he assured me. 'Not for four, five, eight days. She has nothing to do with me. I have divorced her. We are no longer living together. She owes me money. She —'

I continued to press him. 'With whom is she living now?' I asked.

'They say she is living with a *kala*,' he muttered, and picked up a potato.

'Khattak Shah?' I cried, more or less at a venture, and was a little astonished to hear him murmur assent.

'Well, what do you know about last night's business?' said I.

He put his knife down on the floor, wiped his hands on his pink waist-cloth and placed them together, palm to palm. His eyes made a laboured circuit of the cook-house. He shifted a pace or two towards the door, lowered his scarred chin towards his finger-tips and dropped on to his haunches. He was evidently happier in that position than on his feet. This manœuvre removed him a little farther from me, besides giving him time to cogitate — to consider his replies.

I allowed him plenty of time to abase himself. 'Well?' I inquired, when he had finished these preliminaries.

'I know nothing,' he said, releasing a hand for a moment to free his tattooed knees from the folds of his waist-cloth. 'Last night I prepared the *thakin's* dinner and then I went to a friend's house — Ba Ni, who lives in Merchant Street. . . . We talked to—

GREEN SANDALS

gether for awhile and then I came back to my go-down and went to sleep.' He picked a chicken bone off the floor and twirled it in his fingers.

'And then?' I demanded.

'I heard nothing during the night,' he returned. 'This morning they told me that the *thakin* had died during the night.'

'What did the *thakin* have for dinner?' I inquired, and the strange sounds he emitted in reply were near enough to chicken cutlets and caramel custard – the food Mrs. Brendish had mentioned – to show that at any rate we had got agreement in the matter of the menu.

'You didn't put anything special into the food, I suppose,' said I.

He showed the whites of his eyes suddenly. I should think this was the first hint he had had that the *thakin's* death might have had some connection with the food he had prepared. 'Only the ordinary things!' he protested. 'What I put in every day!'

'Show me the things you put in every day,' I ordered, and he lifted himself on to his feet and, with his body doubled and an apprehensive droop in his left shoulder, moved about the cook-house, thrusting onion husks and potato peelings with nervous fingers this way and that to get at what he wanted. Soon he had an assortment of tins and twists of paper spread out on the floor before me, containing turmeric, cloves, jaggery, cardamoms and what not. I made a show of examining them, frowning darkly as I tasted and sniffed, though there was absolutely nothing suspicious about them. I didn't suspect the

GREEN SANDALS

fellow in the least, but I wanted to bring home to him that if he didn't prove actively helpful, there would be trouble in store for him.

'Has Ma E ever brought you things to put into the curry?' I asked at length.

'Never!' he affirmed stoutly, and then he ventured to refresh my memory. 'I have divorced the woman,' he said. 'She has not been in the cook-house for a month. She is living with a *kala*.'

'Where are they living?' said I.

'Somewhere near the steamer *ghat*,' he replied. 'The *kala* has a shop in Salween Road.'

I don't know that the man really knew where his wife was, but the fact that he had begun to take the trouble to draw on his imagination showed it unlikely that he would deliberately withhold any real fact he knew might be useful to me. By this time I had him in the hollow of my hand and, after another question or two, I left him squatting wide-eyed and wide-mouthed among his potato peelings and went out into the compound again.

The trusty Shwe Lu had obeyed my instructions to the letter. He had got hold of the Madrasi boy, David, and was hanging on to him. The two were seated opposite each other in the shade of a big jack tree and if, as I approached, Shwe Lu had not got hold of David with both hands, that was merely because he had freed one of them for a moment to accept a betel chew which the latter – a rather cheerful-looking rascal with a small black moustache – had been preparing for him. The two of them scrambled to their feet as I approached, Shwe Lu

GREEN SANDALS

with a detaining finger still on the Madrasi's arm.

I questioned David in English as he stood there in the open, rubbing the sole of his right foot against his left calf and fiddling behind his back at his shoulder blades. He had a good deal more to tell me than San Dun. With the exception of the murderer (if any) he had been the last person to see Brendish alive. He had brought his master his dinner a little after the usual hour – chicken cutlets and caramel custard, right enough – and, after clearing the table, had retired to the cook-house, within easy hail, to chat with the ayah. About ten o'clock the ayah had gone off to her go-down and he had sat on alone, on the off-chance of being required by his master, who by this time, as David judged by the movement of lights in the house, had gone upstairs to his dressing-room. Silence, it appeared, had reigned in the house where Brendish was. David had not been called and nothing had happened until about half-past ten, when Mrs. Brendish had arrived from dining out.

'So I heard Missis coming in the office *gharry* and went quickly,' he informed me, bringing his black hand to the fore for a second to show how quickly.

'Did she come alone?' I asked.

'No, sir,' he said. 'Mr. Staynes also coming. They two together in the *gharry*.'

'And you're certain,' I went on, 'that no one came into or out of the house between the time when Mr. Brendish went upstairs and the time when Mrs. Brendish came back from dining out?'

After a reasonable amount of back-scratching David was absolutely certain. He had never quitted

GREEN SANDALS

his seat by the cook-house door which, as any one could see from where we were now standing, gave him a close and unimpeded view of the bungalow.

'And when Mrs. Brendish came in the *gharry*, what happened?' I asked.

'Mrs. Brendish went upstairs,' said he. 'Mr. Staynes, he remained in the downstairs part. Then I go to fetch whisky and soda for that master. I fetched and came back again and waited near by the cook-house. All this time Missis is upstairs with Mr. Brendish.'

'About how long was that?' said I.

'Quite a long time, sir,' was his reply.

'What do you mean by quite a long time?' I demanded. 'About half an hour?'

David wrinkled his face in calculation. 'I think about half an hour,' he said.

'Did you hear them talking together?'

'No, sir, No talking heard. All quiet, like as though asleep.'

'When did Mrs. Brendish come down again?'

'I don't know, sir. Not knowing if she truly came down to see Mr. Staynes.'

'Ah! What was Mr. Staynes doing all this time?' I asked.

'I think Mr. Staynes all that time sitting downstairs, not moving at all. Only I can't say what is happening in the front part of the house. After some time I heard Missis call out to Mr. Staynes. I think she's telling him to come upstairs. He went up to where she stopped, calling, and they two talked

GREEN SANDALS

together. Then Mr. Staynes, he come down running very quick.'

'You say Mrs. Brendish called him up,' I said. 'How long was he upstairs that time?'

'A plenty short time. Only he went up and then he comes down running, running, to fetch Major Priestley.' David began to use his hands again.

'How did you know he had gone to fetch Major Priestley?' I asked.

'No, sir, not knowing at all. I am always sitting close to the cook-house, but the ayah came across from her place and ask me why they send for the doctor in his night clothes. I said I didn't know at all,' and she tell me the doctor is stopping upstairs, therefore I think he is surely fetched for by Mr. Staynes. After the ayah spoken I went into the house and upstairs.'

'Did you know what had happened then?' said I.

'No, sir. At that time I think Mr. Brendish got fever only.'

'When did you find out what had happened?'

'I didn't know what had happened. But upstairs I heard Mrs. Brendish telling Mr. Staynes —'

'About what had happened?' I asked, for he had pulled himself up short.

'I don't think about what happened, sir,' he declared. 'Not what happened to Mr. Brendish. Only I heard two or three words.'

'What kind of words?' I inquired, feeling that he was keeping something back from me.

'Different words,' David rolled his eyes, swayed his *pagried* head, fingered his waist-belt, shuffled harder

GREEN SANDALS

than ever with his feet. I knew the symptoms and all at once I was gripped with an unreasoning desire to find out what Mrs. Brendish had said to Staynes that this shifty Madrasi was so loth to repeat. 'You've got to tell me everything, you beggar!' I growled, thrusting my chin out at him. 'What was it you heard Mrs. Brendish say?'

'Only about being mad,' the creature faltered.

'About being mad!' I echoed. 'What did she mean? Was Major Priestley there?'

'No, sir. Major Priestley done gone away again by that time. I see him go downstairs before I come up. Only Mrs. Brendish and Mr. Staynes up there then.'

I couldn't leave it at that. 'Who did she say was mad?' I demanded. 'Was it Mr. Staynes that had been mad?'

'I don't think so, sir,' protested David. 'I think it's Mrs. Brendish saying she's mad.'

'Mrs. Brendish,' I cried. 'What makes you think she meant herself? Wasn't it Mr. Brendish who had been mad? Think, man, think!'

I put it to David with some ferocity, while Shwe Lu breathed heavily behind him, but the idiot could only continue to blink nervously and clasp and unclasp his hands behind his body.

'Can't say what makes,' he confessed finally, with his shoulders up to his ears. 'Truly, at that time I think it is Mrs. Brendish who is saying she is mad for what she has done. But only I heard these two or three words, sir. Therefore who can say?'

I glared at him mistrustfully, but, eye him as I

GREEN SANDALS

would, I could not make him recede from his position. And then all at once it came over me that I was a sneaking gratuitous Paul Pry, and that Shwe Lu, who was cocking his ears in the background, was another. What business was it of ours to try and work out of this dunder-headed Asiatic what in the passion of the moment Mrs. Brendish might have said over her husband's dead body. I could ask the parties concerned myself. I was literally frightened of questioning David further. I had no idea what impudent theory of his own he might advance as to the meaning of Mrs. Brendish's heart-broken cry. I couldn't conceive now why I had let him repeat it.

This practically put an end to my examination. I asked him a few more questions, but I paid very little heed to his replies and in a minute or two I let him go. As a matter of form I interrogated the ayah, who knew practically nothing, the syce, who knew nothing at all, the water carrier, who, I found, was useless for my purposes, and then, with Shwe Lu still at my heels, I walked out of the compound.

CHAPTER XXI

You can picture me, after I had finished with the servants, standing, perspiring and vaguely perturbed, by my pony's head on the road outside the Brendishes' bungalow. The last white shreds of morning mist had melted, and it was still early enough in the day for the sun to be at a height when it can peer dazzlingly in under one's hat brim.

A bullock-cart creaked slowly past me, bound for the suburbs, the driver nodding on the shaft, and I drew to one side of the track to avoid the cloud of red dust that the thing was raising and let my gaze wander, hoping against hope that Mrs. Brendish might suddenly show her pale face at some upper window and call me to her. However, stare as I might, no sign was vouchsafed me, and the sight of Shwe Lu, with his eyes fixed, dog-like, upon me, reminded me that my morning's work was but half done. I swung myself into the saddle, pulling my helmet down over my eyes.

What was to be my next move? Whom should I next examine?

There was really no need for me to ask myself the question. I had already answered it for myself—most grudgingly. The important person for my ends now was young Staynes, and the interviewing of young Staynes was a task from which my soul revolted. I hoped one day to have the chance of letting him know in set terms what I thought about him, but that day was not yet, and meanwhile it was my duty to find out from him without alarming him

GREEN SANDALS

exactly what he was prepared to let us know; so I clenched my jaw, sent Shwe Lu off to the police station to report progress and turned my beast's nose in the direction of Staynes' bungalow.

The young man shared a rambling teak chummary with Wheeler and another of Blackburns' men, whose name, so far as I remember, was Blake. By this time it was an hour when, in Mingin, energetic youth was abroad, trampling the roads on pony back or plodding through the bazaar, making the most of the cool minutes. Only the sluggards were abed. Wheeler and Blake had, when I arrived, already cleared out of the house, which was so much to the good for me. I did not want them hanging around. Staynes was in the sluggard category. He was said to be fast asleep when I asked for him — a fact which seemed to point either to a thick-skinned conscience or else very late hours the night before.

'Wake him up and ask him to come down and see me,' I shouted to the servant in my loudest District Superintendent's voice, and waited in the verandah till my man came flapping down — unshaven — in Chinese slippers, having thrown a light pink Japanese dressing-gown over his flimsy bed togger.

His hair was tousled, his eyelids were barely under control; his brain was still so clouded with sleep that for awhile he could do nothing but stand and stare, blinking, at me. He certainly had had no time since he was turned out of bed to think out any methods of evasion, which again was so much to the good for me.

'Sorry to have had to get you up like this,' I said

GREEN SANDALS

when, after several irresolute motions, he had subsided, open-mouthed, into a long arm-chair opposite me. 'I've come about Brendish, you know. I didn't have a chance of speaking to you last night.'

'You could have if you had wanted to,' he returned dully, drawing his hand across his lips as though to keep them together. 'I passed you on the road. I called out to you.'

'Well, anyway, what about the business?' I demanded. 'You were there, weren't you?'

'Have you spoken to Mrs. Brendish about it?' he asked, avoiding my eye.

'I have, and to Priestley too,' I replied.

'What do they think of it?' he inquired, staring at his slippers.

'All sorts of things,' said I. 'But, look here, I haven't come to tell you what they think about it. I want to find out what you know. It's official, this.'

He balanced a slipper on the tip of his bare foot. 'I don't suppose I can tell you anything that they haven't told you already,' he muttered. Then he ran his hand over his forehead. 'You must excuse me,' he exclaimed, suddenly and fretfully, as though disgusted at being taken at a disadvantage. 'I didn't get a wink of sleep until just before daybreak. Then I went off like a log . . . till the boy called me just now. I hardly know where I am. I'm all in a mizz. You must give me time to think!'

'I'll give you plenty,' I promised, and pulled out a cheroot and lit it.

By this time his servant had brought him tea on a tray. It was his *chota haziri*. There were two cups

GREEN SANDALS

and he offered me one, which I declined. 'Had mine two hours ago,' said I, and, lying back in my chair, I blew smoke rings to put him at his ease.

I could tell by the clattering way in which he handled his tea-cup that I was not the best of soothers. He sipped for awhile, then he put his cup down softly and, without any warning, started off, as though rehearsing a part long since learnt but now almost forgotten. His voice was what I can best describe as a 'tight-rope' voice. It felt its way with caution; it wavered; it seemed to steady itself with difficulty; it balanced hazardingly before embarking on each fresh word. One half expected it to wobble off before it reached the end of a sentence.

'We had been at the Bairds', Mrs. Brendish and I had,' he said. 'You weren't dining there, I think. . . . She gave me a lift part of the way home. . . . In her *gharry*, you know. . . . Brendish hadn't come to the dinner. . . . I don't know whether he had been seedy, but I don't think so. . . . We got to the house and she asked me to come in and have a peg. . . . I stopped downstairs and had a drink and she went upstairs to see how Brendish was. She was a little fussed about him.'

'Why?' I inquired.

'Oh, I don't know,' he declared, and rubbed his hands against his knees. 'You know how women worry. . . . He was a queer chap, old Brendish. I think I knew him better than most people in Mingin.'

'Was he the kind of man to commit suicide?' I asked.

GREEN SANDALS .

'Suicide!' he echoed. One could almost have imagined, by the way his mouth went down, that this was the first time that this theory had been presented to him. In any case, he seemed quite ready to entertain it favourably. 'I should think he probably *was*,' he declared after a pause.

I got him back to his story. 'Well,' said I, 'you were saying she went upstairs to see how Brendish was.'

He drew a deep breath. 'Yes,' he said. 'And just as she was going upstairs she saw some Burmese sandals on the floor of the verandah belonging to that woman, Ma E — her cook's wife, you know.'

'How do you know they were Ma E's?' I asked.

I hoped to goodness he would have some acceptable reason of his own to give, but he had not. He merely opened his mouth at me. 'Mrs. Brendish said they were hers,' he murmured presently, and then he took up his tale again. 'Somehow the sight of them worried her more than ever,' he said. 'I suppose she guessed the woman was upstairs with Brendish — and well she might! . . . She was the deuce of a slippery customer — Ma E was. . . . I've heard a lot about her and her drugs. . . . She sold me some stuff once that —'

I cut his digression short. 'Well, after Mrs. Brendish had gone up?' I said.

'I'm coming to that,' was his reply. 'She wasn't very long up there before I heard her calling to me. She told me she couldn't wake Brendish up. She asked me to come upstairs. Of course I did so and I found Brendish in a chair in his dressing-room, all

GREEN SANDALS

doubled up—sort of. I thought he was asleep at first, but then I looked again and saw he was dead.'

'So what did you do?' I asked.

'I bolted off *ek dum* and got hold of Priestley and he came and had a look at the body and said there was nothing to be done for Brendish. He seemed to think there ought to be a post-mortem and presently he went off to make the arrangements about it, and I . . . well, there didn't seem to be anything more for me to do, so I left the house and came home and turned in. I crossed you on the road not far from the turning off into Tiger Alley. That's all I know.'

I don't know whether he expected me, on hearing these last words, which were uttered with an air of finality, to rise from my chair and leave him to his *chota haziri*. If so, he was mistaken. I felt I had only reached the fringe of the matter. I settled myself more firmly than ever and continued to ply him.

'How long was Mrs. Brendish upstairs before she asked you to come up?' I inquired.

'What? After she first went up?' He looked first one way and then the other and pinched his lips together, as though to call up as clear a picture as possible of the past. 'Oh, not so very long,' he replied, moving his head slowly from side to side. 'Perhaps five minutes. It may have been a trifle longer, but I know it wasn't very long.'

I think I gave a little grunt of relief. I am bound to say that David's account of a half-hour interval, in which all kinds of unpleasant things would have

GREEN SANDALS

had time to happen, had left me with a nasty taste in my mouth. This five minutes was better . . . very much better! I resumed my inquisition, feeling that Staynes might, after all, have something really comforting to tell me.

'Did she say anything to you then about the cause of her husband's death?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said eagerly. 'She told me all about Ma E. She accused her straight off.'

'Of what?' I asked.

He drew his chin in sharply. 'Oh Lord, I don't know!' he returned. 'There are plenty of ways of killing a man!'

'Of poisoning him, for instance,' said I.

'She didn't go into particulars,' he declared. 'Anyhow, she was quite certain about the woman's having done it. She told me she had seen her upstairs – sneaking off. It was all absolutely *pucca*.'

Of course no one had suggested that it was not absolutely *pucca*, but I did not comment on this. 'You didn't by any chance see Ma E yourself, I suppose!' I exclaimed with a sudden hope.

He was looking down again at his bare feet. 'No, I can't say I did,' he returned. 'But while I was down below and Mrs. Brendish upstairs I heard something that may have been her.'

I caught him up eagerly. 'What was that?' I asked.

He put his head down as though to study the pattern of his pyjamas. 'A kind of scuffling – hurrying sound,' he said, choosing his words with almost painful deliberation.

GREEN SANDALS

'Ah!' I observed. 'And you thought that might have been Ma El'

To cover my own feelings I had to take several long pulls at my cheroot. Frankly, I detested having to press him further, but I knew I should never rest content till I had got at least one more assurance from him. At last, with a final puff of smoke, I brought out my point.

'A scuffling sound, you say,' I observed. 'Was it anything like two persons struggling together?'

I had my gaze fixed intently on him and he knew it, for, though his head was down – with the tuft of hair at the crown thrust aggressively up – I could get a flickering sideways glimpse of the whites of the young beggar's eyes. He was trying to take stock of me without lifting his head itself. He was fully aware of what I was driving at with my query and I did not need to be told that he hated answering it.

I did not need to be told because what he felt in this matter I felt too. Hadn't I myself had a vague morbid picture of an angry encounter in a small dressing-room lit by a dim wall-lamp, an encounter with a deplorable end? Hadn't I myself been trying to shut the picture out? And now, watching Staynes' discomfiture, couldn't I fancy that he was attempting to do something of the same kind himself?

I continued to watch him, fascinated, and he, I suppose, in fitful snatches, watched me, for as we sat there opposite to each other, with our knees almost touching, I saw a strange hint of revelation and reassurance creeping into his half-averted face,

GREEN SANDALS

and all at once it was borne in upon me that the ineffable youth in the absurd dressing-gown had found me out. In spite of my official airs and graces I had betrayed myself. One of these swift upward glances had told him that the thing that I feared most to hear was the word that was to incriminate Mrs. Brendish.

And, as this conviction grew, I could see a change come over him. He began to raise his head. He straightened his back. He stretched his legs. His regard, now full on me, as good as challenged me to say that he and I were not wholly at one in the matter.

By the time he spoke his voice had become quite firm and even. 'No, certainly not in the least like people struggling together,' he declared and, turning sideways in his outrageous flowered toggery, he stirred his tea-cup and — to show how much at ease he was — he took two or three leisurely sips.

Of course I saw through the youngster, just as he saw through me. He was not going to tell me what he really had thought about the scuffling sound, and he was quite satisfied I would not press him. It was a relief to know that Mrs. Brendish was safe in his hands, but it was galling to discover that he was calmly assuming my readiness to scrap my official conscience for her sake. To tell the truth, his assurance made me furious, and I found myself casting about, as I bit at my cheroot end, for some means whereby I might trounce him without at the same time applying the lash to Mrs. Brendish.

'You say that when you went up to Mrs. Brendish

GREEN SANDALS

she told you she had just seen Ma E,' I growled out presently.

He nodded assent.

'And she told you she thought Ma E had killed her husband and gone off,' I went on. 'Good Heavens, man, do you mean to tell me that you made absolutely no attempt to go after the woman and catch her?'

He sat up a little in his chair. 'It was too late to do anything then,' he replied. 'She might have been anywhere by that time.' He waved his hands vaguely, as though by sheer gesture he could convince me.

His words were almost the very same as those that Mrs. Brendish had used at a most disquieting stage of the previous night's business. This significant repetition gave me a shadowy sense of collusion. Was it possible that the two had thought the whole thing out between them? Was this echoed phrase the result?

'But my good chap!' I persisted. 'You say the whole thing was over in a minute. Mrs. Brendish went upstairs; there was what you call a scuffling sound; you heard Mrs. Brendish calling out; you ran up to her and she immediately accused Ma E! Did it never strike you that it was up to you to go and collar the woman?'

He pursed his lips and wagged his knees inwards and outwards. 'You mustn't run away with the idea that the whole thing was over in a minute,' he objected. 'I said five minutes. It may have been a bit more. Besides, I didn't rush up immediately I

GREEN SANDALS

heard the scuffling. I didn't rush up at all. I just walked. Anyway, by the time I had got to Mrs. Brendish we both saw it was no good thinking of laying hands on the woman then. As a matter of fact we were both too busy wondering what we could do for poor old Brendish.'

There was, of course, something in this. I hardly know what prompted me to ask my next question. I could see Staynes was 'in it' right enough, but I was thirsting to gauge the depth of his commitments. In any case, the words were out of my mouth before I realized it.

'There's one more thing I want to ask you, Staynes,' I said. 'Did Mrs. Brendish blame herself at all for what had happened?'

'Blame herself?' he echoed. 'Blame herself?' He tried to voice surprise, but it struck me that he was merely trying to gain time to make his actual answer ring absolutely true. 'No, not a bit!' he declared finally. Then he cleared his throat, to add, with a touch of defiance, 'Why the deuce should she blame herself.'

We sat in silence opposite one another. All at once he picked up the tea-pot to pour himself out another cup of tea. The manœuvre only served to show that his hand was trembling badly. He deluged saucer and tray. His assurance had been terribly short-lived. He was debating, I could see, as he fiddled with the tea things, whether to suffer his own question to go unanswered or whether to keep me to it. In the end he declared for the bolder – and perhaps the safer – course.

GREEN SANDALS

‘Why should she blame herself’ he asked again, with his voice raised unsteadily. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, did she seem to think that it was any remissness on her part that had given Ma E the chance of getting hold of Brendish?’ said I.

‘Certainly not!’ he answered, so indignantly that I felt bound, in justice to myself, to take him a step or two further. ‘You may wonder at my asking that,’ I went on, ‘but perhaps I ought to let you know that David, their Madrasi boy, tells me he heard Mrs. Brendish say something that sounded like – well, like self-reproach.’

‘Their Madrasi boy!’ He shifted round slowly in his chair and by the time his face was turned full on me I saw it was a whitish grey, not at all pleasant to look at. I had upset him with a vengeance now. I could see that he was casting his mind guiltily back without getting any satisfactory result. ‘That beggar David!’ he cried out at last, with a passion that did him more credit than anything else he had exhibited. ‘I’ve no idea what the fool heard or imagined he heard, but if he thinks that Mrs. Brendish has anything to reproach herself with, he’s utterly mistaken!’

By the time he had finished his sentence wrath had actually brought a speck or two of his colour back. I did not mind this outburst, though I suspected that when he pleaded complete ignorance, he was speaking without book. It may seem an extraordinary thing, but my only feeling at the moment was that I rather grudged him his being able to pose

GREEN SANDALS

indignantly as the whole-hearted champion of Mrs. Brendish – a *rôle* which, but for the stern call of professional duty, I should have been proud to assume myself. I began to look upon my young Staynes with new eyes. I suddenly felt I had been rather a beast to him – that at any rate there was no call for me to harry the poor wretch unnecessarily.

He was staring out in front of him, breathing deep breaths. With a quick gulp he cried out, 'Will you tell me exactly what that eavesdropping skunk overheard!'

I confess I liked him for his 'eavesdropping skunk.' I believe that was very much how I myself – as I remembered David's evasive wriggings – would have liked to phrase it. 'Well,' I said, 'if you will have it, according to him Mrs. Brendish said she must have been "mad" to do something or other she seems to have done. People like her don't usually think themselves to have been mad without something to go upon, you see.'

I looked him up and down rather searchingly as I spoke, though, as David's shifty protests came back to me, I began to wonder whether I had anything more than a senseless parrot cry to 'go upon' myself, and it was this feeling that I might have been making a mountain out of a mole-hill which compelled me to add – almost apologetically, 'Of course you can never tell what muddle these Madrasis may make of what they overhear. The chap may have got hold of the wrong end of the stick entirely. Anyhow, I'm telling you what he said so that you can remove any false impression.'

GREEN SANDALS

Staynes did not speak for a long time. He made some business of mopping his forehead – which was beaded, and not by the heat of the morning only. I could see by this time he had remembered exactly what it was that David had overheard and was calling the unhappy Asiatic an eavesdropping skunk more heartily than ever. When at last he broke the silence his feelings were still weighing him down. ‘Then it was something that she was saying to *me* that he professes to have overheard!’ he cried.

‘That’s so,’ I agreed.

‘And you want me to tell you exactly what it was she said?’

Of course, up till then that had been my idea, but, even as he spoke, I made the odd discovery that, for both our sakes, I didn’t at the moment want any more admissions out of him.

‘Tell me? Not in the least,’ I made answer. ‘I just wanted you to know what the fellow thought he overheard and what he passed on to me. You’ll have to tell some one all about it later when the time comes, young man.’

I wished I had not called him ‘young man,’ for the words brought back into his face that look of almost impudent assurance to which I had already taken exception. He made no attempt to check the little sigh of relief that escaped him. It was obvious that the respite I had granted was worth untold gold to him. ‘Thanks!’ he murmured brazenly, thereby showing that he considered the understanding between us complete.

Neither of us said much to the purpose after that,

GREEN SANDALS

and a few minutes later I left him standing there in his babyish dressing-gown by his long arm-chair, not by any means the tortured wreck I had started out to make of him. I knew, as I turned my back on him, that if forewarned is forearmed, I had gratuitously put a weapon in the hands of the defence and did not feel at all sure that, if I really had the feelings of a gentleman, I ought not, the moment I got home, to send in the resignation of my appointment in the police. It was absurd my imagining that after this I could look at the Brendish case with an impartial eye, and I should certainly not have attempted to investigate it myself if it hadn't been equally absurd my imagining that I could safely leave the business to some blundering, prejudiced subordinate.

But what I was thinking of hardest, as I got on to my pony again, was not of who ought or ought not to investigate the case but of something quite different – of whether Staynes would tell Mrs. Brendish next time he saw her of how I had shown my hand. I hoped that at any rate he would make my good will reasonably clear to her. It would have been too detestable for me to have betrayed my office in the way I had and for her to be absolutely none the wiser!

CHAPTER XXII

I HEARD the result of the post-mortem in due course, in fact very soon after breakfast, of which, I am free to say, I ate uncommonly little, being up to my eyes in worry. Priestley suddenly appeared in my verandah with his mouth screwed up.

'Yes, I'll have a peg, thanks,' he said, as he dropped into a chair opposite me. He sank back with his hands together and his finger-tips joined and looked up at me from over them. 'I've just finished with Brendish,' he announced, nodding his bald forehead at me.

'Ah!' I observed. 'Have you got anything to send to the Chemical Examiner?'

'Well,' he returned, 'I'm letting him have a sample to dig at, just for form's sake. After all, he's paid for his job. It's really hardly necessary, though. Enough cyanide to kill a dozen men.'

I whistled softly. 'Self-administered?' I asked.

'Can't say,' he groaned. 'It must have been taken somewhere about the same time as his dinner, probably a bit later.' He wrinkled his nose. 'Lord! It's a dirty business cutting 'em up!' he observed, and licked his lips impatiently. 'Why didn't I go into the church, Venne? I could have preached damned good sermons!'

We sat opposite each other, not moving or speaking, while my servant fetched a whisky and soda and placed it, well-earned, at my visitor's elbow. Not a word was said till the man had gone and Priestley had dipped deep into the tumbler.

GREEN SANDALS

At last he sighed and stirred his arms and legs. 'She didn't have dinner with him, you know,' he said. 'He had been dining at home and she was at the Bairds'.'

'Yes, I heard that,' I returned, and waited for more. His start was not encouraging. Honestly, I felt at a disadvantage with Priestley. Except for that tense minute or two while Brendish's body was being removed from the dressing-room, I had not seen him and Mrs. Brendish together. I have spoken of that dumb appeal he made to me as we stood a little later by Brendish's remains in the light of the hurricane lantern below. It was most awkward not knowing how far that dismayed gesture reflected what he had actually heard from the mouth of Brendish's wife before I appeared on the scene.

'Did you find out why he didn't go to the Bairds' with her?' was his next question. 'As I say, he never called me in, but he may have been ill all the same. Did she say anything to you about it?'

'Not a word about his being ill,' said I.

'Still there must have been *something* to keep him at home,' he argued. 'A bit off colour, say – taking medicine, you know. Quinine, perhaps . . . that's not unlike to look at. . . . You might mistake it for something else. Everybody knows accidents do happen. . . . Look here, Venne, did she seem to think it couldn't be a case of suicide?'

'She wouldn't hear of it,' I said. 'She put everything down to the Burman woman, Ma E. Wasn't that what she told you?'

He bowed his wrinkled brow in assent. He picked

GREEN SANDALS

up his peg tumbler and frowned at it as reproachfully as if it had been empty, which it was not. 'I say, Venne,' he groaned. 'Isn't she damned foolish to rule it out like that. . . . Wouldn't it simplify matters? . . . A word from her, you know. . . . That Chetty is selling him up, remember! . . . It must have broken him — got on his nerves. . . I don't like it! I don't like it! . . . What's she up to? . . . A fine woman like that, too! . . . How many years have they been married? . . . Do you think she can have given him a dose to take after dinner? . . . Made a mistake about the drug? . . . Put the wrong stuff in?'

He watched me anxiously, looking to me to help him out, and when I continued to sit silent he jerked his hands up impotently. 'You don't think so?' he cried. 'Well, damn it all! The other thing, then? Could she, possibly? . . . Mind you, I don't want to be down on her, but we've got to think of everything. Brendish led her a life, I expect! That bazaar woman, too! . . . She must have had some hold over him. . . . I've always thought he took drugs. . . . Could it have been a mistake?'

'Why should Mrs. Brendish have been the one to give him a dose?' I demanded gloomily. 'Talking about that bazaar woman —'

'Do you honestly think she was ever there?' he cried, interrupting me. 'And if she were, is she more likely to have given it than Mrs. Brendish?'

I felt sick and miserable, but I was not to be beaten down. 'Quite as likely, anyway,' I said.

'My dear chap! My dear chap!' he protested.

GREEN SANDALS

'If we had found him stuck through with a knife or with a pistol bullet in his head, there would have been some object in talking like that, but a woman can't hold a man down in his chair and shove a tot of poison down his throat against his will, can she?'

'She may have got round him – Ma E,' I urged. 'She may have made him think he was just taking some narcotic. She deals in cocaine and *ganja* and what not.'

'Does she, now?' he cried. He turned this new fact over hopefully for nearly a minute, but after all extracted little enough comfort from it. He drew a deep breath finally. 'Brendish was a bit of an ass,' he announced, 'but I don't see even Brendish letting a female of that sort play that kind of game with him. No, there's only one woman who could have persuaded him to take the stuff blindly from her hand – and we know who she is!' He rubbed his baldness distractedly. 'Have you questioned the servants, Venner?' he asked. 'Did any of them see Ma E on the premises at the time?'

'Not a soul,' said I.

He continued to rub his head. 'I wish the deuce she had said it was Ma E straight off!' he murmured.

I was up in arms in a moment. 'She did!' I exclaimed. 'I've been speaking to Staynes. He says she accused the woman directly.'

Priestley dislodged a drop of perspiration that had been caught between two folds on his agitated forehead. 'Then you can take it from me that young Staynes is lying,' said he. 'Staynes had been with her for some time before I turned up and she didn't

GREEN SANDALS

breathe a word about Ma E until I had had a look at the body and asked some questions about it. What's more, when she first said the woman was in it, Staynes asked her point blank why she hadn't mentioned her before!

'You heard him?' I cried incredulously.

'With these ears,' he replied.

'And what did she say to that?' I demanded.

'She told him he ought to have guessed before,' was his answer. 'Ought to have guessed, if you please! Just as though they had discussed the matter already! . . . Look here, Venne. . . . Staynes, now. . . . The young blighter! . . . It's a dirty business. . . . I don't like the look of it! . . . What was he doing there at that time of night? . . . Telling those lies about her! . . . Trying to shield her! . . . I don't like it! I don't like it!'

I could not help thinking, as I watched his tormented jerkings, that if I had told him all I knew he would have liked it even less! I would not now for worlds have told him. I felt there was absolutely nothing that I could say to give him peace of mind, and I had to let him sit and simmer and mop himself distractedly until, the hour being by this time well advanced, he had to go about his daily duties and, disliking it all as much as ever, took himself and his worries off in his high dog-cart.

I will not pretend that I was any happier than he when I betook myself to my own office. However, there was plenty for me to do there to keep me from brooding. A report, after formalities observed, had to be sent to the District Magistrate with a view to an

GREEN SANDALS

inquest on Brendish's remains. The District Magistrate, Gower, an untidy but conscientious Civilian, found it a case for rapid action and arranged to hold the inquiry that same evening. It lay with me to see that all persons said to be acquainted with the facts were ready at the appointed hour. My work was cut out for me.

There was no difficulty about the attendance of Mrs. Brendish, the servants and Staynes. The main question for me was whether I should be able to lay my hands on Ma E before the evening. Inquiry at the police stations gave no great prospect of success. Up till recently the woman's whereabouts had been known to various well-informed persons who pored over blue registers in the town office. She had been living in the Brendishes' compound a fortnight before, but after that the constable charged with her surveillance had missed her from her usual haunts and, to do the man (a thin, stammering fellow) justice, had informed his immediate superiors of the fact. I couldn't blame the latter for not passing the information on to me, for I had given no special orders to this effect. In any case, the plaguy female had vanished. Her stall in the bazaar stood empty. It was obvious that any inquiry regarding her movements which was not to defeat its own end had to be conducted with secrecy and caution, but such as was possible had, it appeared, already been made, and the impression on the minds of the police was that Ma E had left Mingin – not by steamer (a public departure would have been noted and recorded by a lynx-eyed gentleman on the

GREEN SANDALS

ship's gangway), but more probably by road or country boat.

'The woman is, no doubt, circulating in near jungle villages,' conjectured Shwe Lu, whom I had called in to receive his orders. 'There is Tawbya and Sheinmalu. These are altogether likely places. I shall make inquiry from Tawbya outpost without delay whether she is seen, and also Duyin *thana*, where there are always a plenty of cocaine consumers.' He spoke with smooth deliberation, pursuing his respectable pouch of a mouth at the end of each sentence. 'Officer in charge of Duyin, whom I know, he is much acquainted with the woman, having had her under observation at the time he was in Mingin. He will be able to report about her. He will be sharply on the look-out.'

'Have you kept a watch on Khattak Shah's place?' I asked.

'Yes, sir,' said the sub-inspector. 'But she is not seen there at all. It is hardly creditable to believe that fellow San Dun's story *re* his wife. He is altogether making a fool of us.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' said I. 'Where does Khattak Shah live?'

'In Salween Road,' said Shwe Lu. 'Shall I go and fetch him to come?'

'You had better come with me and we'll look him up together,' said I.

I was determined to lose no time. Tawbya, an outpost ten miles away, and Duyin, an even more distant station, left me cold. I was bent on finding my quarry nearer home. It was not impossible that

GREEN SANDALS

Ma E should be found at either of the places named, in fact my one fear, I suddenly discovered, was that she *might* be found at one or the other and thus be half-way to establishing the alibi I was determined she should not prove. I hoped, however, for better things.

It did not take us long to reach the quarter where Khattak Shah conducted his dubious traffickings. Salween Road was a squalid disorderly thoroughfare that turned unobtrusively off from the Strand bank (like a pickpocket popping round the corner at the sight of uniform khaki and brass buttons). It was within a stone's throw of the steamer *ghat* and the promenade of respectable citizens. It was the haunt of ladies of slippery morals. It abounded in low-class pawnshops and eating-houses of the more disreputable kind. Tawdry women with thin faces sat watchfully at the windows of upper storeys. Black-bearded men in soiled white *dhotis* slunk in and out of the tumble-down wooden houses. There were a few Chinese and a sprinkling of Burmans. A gaudily decorated Chinese joss house stood, with its scarlet scrolls and green dragons, at the corner where this alley-way branched off from the river-side promenade. One could picture Ma E thoroughly at home in this quarter of vice. Every second man exhibited the skin and eyes of an opium smoker. Mangy pariah dogs, that one could imagine to have been driven out of the better-class streets, nosed through the refuse in the deep masonry drains on each side of the road.

A coolie in a red loin-cloth, with a kerosene oil

GREEN SANDALS

tin on each side of him, squatted in the hot sunshine under the tap of a hydrant as we went up the road, letting the water gush over his shining back and shoulders. A woman waited her turn, with an earthenware water-pot on one hip and a naked baby astride of the other. In a near verandah a brawny Madrasi sat and subjected his long matted locks to the attentions of a quick-fingered companion. A bullock cart, wheezing ahead of us, took up nearly the whole of the roadway and distributed the brick-red dust impartially on either hand.

Shwe Lu presently pulled up in front of a shop which displayed in its open front neatly piled pyramids of brown jaggery and white sweetmeats, together with bowls of yellow turmeric, dried apricots, areca nut and spices. The place seemed to be in the charge of a small green-capped, black-haired Indian boy who lounged, bare to the waist, and interspersed the business of peeling a long yellow plantain with occasional raids on the flies that swarmed incessantly round the sugary heaps. Questioned by Shwe Lu, the youth professed not to know whether Khattak Shah was on the premises, but offered to go and see, and would have slipped nimbly away to the back regions of the shop had I not caught him in time by the arm. I thought it better for Shwe Lu and myself to go in the direction indicated and, unannounced, investigate for ourselves.

We went round the end of a tattered mat partition and found ourselves in an airless, ill-lit back room, littered with packing-cases and sacks — which, if green cap had preceded us, I make bold to say we

GREEN SANDALS

should have found untenanted. As it was, we came most satisfactorily upon Khattak Shah, stout and swarthy, in the lightest of undress, squatting in earnest talk with an elderly Mussulman in a green *pagri* whose scrubby beard was dyed red with henna. The big man rose at our approach, covering his black looks as best he could with a mask of suavity. His small deep-set eyes took us in in a flash and forthwith he towered before us a mass of bulky obsequiousness. He was our humble servant. He was for fetching a chair for me. The pink and yellow square of Brussels carpet that had accommodated him was not good enough for a visitor of my distinction.

I waved his attentions abruptly aside. I had my point and was bent on reaching it as quickly as possible.

'Khattak Shah,' I said in my most long-suffering Hindustani, 'I want to know if you can tell me where Ma E is.'

I did not speak without having weighed my pros and cons. There were risks in letting the rascal see that the police were after Ma E. To give her protector an inkling of our designs was as good as to give it to the lady herself, and that gift, if she had not known she was suspect, would have been shockingly bad tactics. Time pressed, however, and I couldn't conceive Ma E keeping out of the way in pure innocence. Moreover, I felt sure that Khattak Shah was scamp enough, if I really made a fuss, to be ready to save his own skin and gain merit with the police by jettisoning a useless colleague.

GREEN SANDALS

It was quite certain that she was a colleague. The sole question was whether she was useless or not and, as I watched him, I gathered she was at any rate useful enough to be worth putting up some little kind of fight for, for he replied immediately, with puzzled deliberation, 'Ma E? I know no Ma E, Sahib.'

'What word is this?' I cried. 'Son of an owl! The whole of Mingin knows Ma E!'

He took this rebuke quite calmly, rubbing his black beard and offering himself to my gaze as a most well-intentioned but hopelessly ill-informed party. He did not ask why I was inquiring about the woman. He knew well enough that it was on official grounds that I had come.

There were, however, of course, official grounds and official grounds. I could see through those black eyes of his the drift of his thoughts. Put crudely, to the accompaniment of a covert leer, it amounted practically to this: 'If it's cocaine, Sahib, it's no use whatever your talking, but if it's anything else, there's no knowing but what I might oblige -'

I saw that if I wanted to screw anything out of him, I should have to show a little more of my hand.

'Have you heard that Brendish Sahib is dead?' I inquired.

The grunt he brought out in reply gave no indication of whether this (as I think it was) was the first he had heard of the matter, but it did show a growing consciousness of the cause of my activities. I could fancy him laughing at himself for being fool enough to imagine that the District Superintendent would

GREEN SANDALS

come to ask him about Ma E if it was cocaine or anything of *that* kind that was on the *tapis*. He raised his eyebrows, glanced down towards his companion, who had continued to squat with his elbows on his knees and his withered hands dangling in front of him, and exchanged a sentence or two with him in Pushtu or some other language I did not understand.

When he turned to me again he had his whole case pat. 'Your Honour is, I think, speaking of a woman, Bibi Jan, a bazaar seller,' said he. 'Muhammad Din, here, says the Burmans sometimes call her Ma E. I have seen her once or twice, in the bazaar, at *tamashas* and the like' (he evidently remembered my presence at the *pwe*), 'but I have always known her as Bibi Jan.'

'That's the woman,' I said. 'I want to find her. Where is she?'

He fixed me very intently with his eyes. 'She is not here,' he said. '*Chala gya!* She has gone! She left Mingin several days ago.'

'*Bhag gya!*' I amended scornfully, but he would not allow that the woman had absconded to avoid arrest. '*Chala gya,*' he persisted.

'Where has she gone?' I asked, and the ruffian proceeded to smooth his swart beard again and to show, with an indulgent lifting of the eyebrows, that I was going about my business in a very amateurish way.

'Tell me,' I repeated nevertheless and with a note of threatening in my voice, 'Where has she gone?'

'How can I say?' he replied. 'Your Honour

GREEN SANDALS

should ask San Dun, the Burman. They say he is her husband.'

'San Dun told me you would know more about her than he did,' said I.

He evidently did not mind San Dun a whit. 'I know!' he echoed. 'Never! . . . *Kabhi! . . . Kabhi nahin!* . . . I don't know where the woman is.' Then, as though to clinch the matter, he added, removing his hand from his beard to wave it persuasively, 'If there is a case against Bibi Jan, there are plenty here who can say she has not been in Mingin this week past.'

At this I was aware of a confirmatory grunt from the old man with his beard dyed red. '*Sach hai,*' he murmured, with his head down. 'It is true. It is true. She left the town some days ago.'

I looked the fellow over. I seemed to remember that henna-stained beard. In fact it came back to me now that I had seen it wagging in neighbourly unison with that of Muzaffar Khan when that redoubtable receiver of stolen property came with a friend or two to visit me on my first arrival in Mingin. I did not need to be told that I had here one of the same precious crew to deal with – one from whom no admission could be drawn that was not dictated by self-interest.

I turned my back on the two Mussulmans and made, without another word, for the entrance. There was really nothing for me to wait for. I had done pretty nearly all that, on a sanguine computation, I had expected to do. I had found out that San Dun's story was not all pure moonshine. I

GREEN SANDALS

had learnt not only that Khattak Shah knew all about Ma E but also that he was well aware that I, in my turn, knew all about him, and I thought it wisest to leave him for awhile to digest this knowledge and settle to his own satisfaction how far regard for his own skin required him to assist the police.

I might, to be sure, before I left, have spoken of the inquest and told Khattak Shah, with appropriate sarcasm, that, if he was so sure Ma E had been absent from Mingin for several days, it was his duty as a good citizen to come and say so. If the inquest had been an ordinary inquest, I should have mentioned it, but, as it was (let me here confess it!) I couldn't bear to think of the man's being presented gratuitously with a chance of discrediting Mrs. Brendish's story by a lie. Nothing that he could say would have shaken me, but, frankly, there was no knowing how Gower would take an alibi — even of Khattak Shah's producing, and to give you the honest truth, it was the fear of what the scamp might say if he came to give evidence that drove me hurriedly out of his shop into the sunlit street.

I took Shwe Lu off with me. It seems absurd to say so, but I was in mortal terror lest if I let him out of my sight, he should blurt out something about the evening's business to the shifty bearded couple we had surprised on their Brussels carpet in the back shop.

CHAPTER XXIII

I know that all the Europeans present were supremely unhappy at the inquiry into Brendish's death – Gower, the presiding magistrate, as much so as anyone. He performed his task with dreary thoroughness in the Brendishes' bungalow, close to the scene of the tragedy, an hour or so before sunset. Space did not allow of his sitting in the dressing-room where the body had been found, but he was accommodated under a punkah in the verandah just outside. With the *purdahs* pulled back it was possible to look right into the dressing-room itself where, in the light of the declining sun could be seen a line of Brendish's jackets dangling, ownerless and forlorn, from their row of pegs. Piece by piece the whole scene was reconstructed as far as possible. We witnesses had to stand exactly as we had stood when the corpse was discovered, Gower watching and whispering to himself the while behind his ragged moustache, and scribbling on the deposition sheets, and scrawling untidy little diagrams showing the position of the rooms and the furniture. From time to time he would rise from his table and step away into the dressing-room and stand there pensive, staring this way and that with his fountain-pen in his mouth and his hands in his pockets, after which he would re-seat himself, heave a sigh or two and ask some more questions, noting down the net result with a face of the deepest gloom. Once he took me off by myself to examine the bathroom and once he and I and the bench clerk walked solemnly down to

GREEN SANDALS

the far end of the verandah, near the head of the steps, and looked at the point where Mrs. Brendish claimed to have seen the figure she had taken to be Ma E's. I remember that, as we came back, Gower paced the exact distance and, when he had resumed his seat, entered some figures on the sheet.

Priestley was the first witness to be examined. I noticed he was by no means as explicit as he had been to me about the post-mortem. There was what appeared to him to be poison in the stomach, he said. He had his own views but was not going to anticipate the report of the Chemical Examiner. He gave us a full description of the condition of the deceased's organs and was then allowed to go. I wished devoutly I could have been released with him, but, having to stop on, I was unfeignedly glad, as I heard the sound of his dog-cart wheels dying on the evening air, that he had left before Mrs. Brendish was examined.

She was the next witness. Very pale and very heavy-eyed, dressed in dead white, she was taken by Gower over the whole wretched business, from the time of her return from the Bairds' to the moment when her husband's body had been removed to the hospital. Gower was evidently worried by her description of the glimpse she professed to have had of Ma E. Like every one else, he was quite unable to make it square with any theory of poisoning. He would have liked, I could see, to dismiss Ma E from consideration and find it a case of misadventure, but Mrs. Brendish would have none of it.

He shifted restlessly in his seat. 'You're sure it

GREEN SANDALS

was your cook's wife you saw, Mrs. Brendish?' he asked, leaning forward, with his finger-tips together.

Her answer came, 'Absolutely sure.'

'In spite of the fact that it was dark?'

'Oh, yes, in spite of that. It was her sandals I saw below.'

He pursed his mouth and gave a foiled look at the paper in front of him. 'The woman had been living some time in the compound, I understand,' he went on.

'About a year,' said she.

'Had your husband and she had any dealings with each other?' he inquired.

'I didn't like the way she hung about,' was her reply. 'He used, I think, to give her money on the sly.'

Gower cocked his head and scratched at his blotting-paper. He looked up suddenly. 'Do you think she had acquired any undesirable control over him?' he brought out with laboured detachment, and for answer she shook her whole body impotently and murmured, 'I don't know! I don't know!'

A little later he tried to work round to his own point of view. 'I suppose you never saw any poison in his possession,' he hazarded.

She had taken me aback by what she had said about money passing. Now she was to make me open my eyes still wider. 'No,' she said, 'but I know Ma E brought him some killing-bottle stuff once,' and I sat bolt upright and looked at her, for I considered I ought to have been told.

GREEN SANDALS

'Killing-bottle stuff! For butterflies, eh?' said Gower. 'How do you know?'

'I saw a parcel she left once, full of it,' said she.

'How did you know it was for your husband?'

'I showed it to him and he told me it was.'

'What happened to the stuff?'

'I wouldn't let him have it. I destroyed it.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. I didn't like the look of it.'

Gower stared hard at his nails. 'Did you think he might be going to take it himself?' he asked, and I leant forward to hear her reply.

'Not for a moment!' she returned, and I sat back, vaguely disappointed.

'So it never got into his hands?' Gower went on.

'No, I burnt every scrap of it.'

'That won't help us for last night, then,' observed Gower. 'This is important, though, Mrs. Brendish. You think this woman might have brought a second lot, eh? How do you suggest she can have used it? A bit difficult, don't you think so? You're sure it was poison?'

'I believe so. Mr. Staynes thought it was, too.'

'Did you see her leave it yourself?'

'No, but Mr. Staynes did,' she said.

Gower flicked eagerly at a corner of the paper in front of him. 'Then we had better hear about that from Mr. Staynes himself,' he observed, drawing in a deep breath of relief.

It was noticeable how Staynes seemed to crop up everywhere through Mrs. Brendish's examination. It was 'Mr. Staynes said this . . . Mr. Staynes did

GREEN SANDALS

that . . . ' till Gower showed that the thing was getting on his nerves.

'How was it that Mr. Staynes happened to be there at all at that hour of the night?' he asked in a worried voice towards the end of his questions.

'I brought him home with me from dinner,' said she. 'He stopped to have a drink while I went up to my husband.'

'You asked him to stop on?'

'Yes.'

'Was that because you saw the sandals and thought Ma E might be upstairs?'

She was gazing straight in front of her. 'That was one reason,' she said. She did not name the others.

'It strikes me you were very lucky to have had him there!' muttered Gower. It was the only occasion during the dreary inquisition when he gave any hint of the doubts and suspicions that must have lurked within him.

She acquiesced with gentle sobriety. 'Very lucky!' she replied softly, and then, at a sign from Gower, she sat down again, resting her elbow on the back of the chair and covering her face with her hand.

Gower wasted much unnecessary time on San Dun and in the end got very little real information out of him as to what had been given to Brendish for dinner the evening before. On the other hand, his examination of the evasive David might have been a great deal fuller. Not a word was said about that self-accusing cry of Mrs. Brendish's that the Madrasi professed to have overheard. I did noth-

GREEN SANDALS

ing, of course, myself to raise a point that might be so absurdly misinterpreted.

With Staynes, I admit, Gower dealt very faithfully, pouncing quickly on the discrepancy between Staynes's and Priestley's account of when Mrs. Brendish first accused Ma E. Eventually Staynes had to allow that it was not till Priestley had arrived on the scene that any mention was made of the woman. He did it with a very bad grace, and altogether left an unpleasant impression. He threw very little light on the earlier poison incident. All that he could say was that he had seen Ma E put a twist of paper on a table and go away. He had looked at the stuff with Mrs. Brendish and thought it suspicious, but was not prepared to say that it was poison. He explained that he had not had the same opportunity of examining it as Mrs. Brendish had.

It was all somewhat unsatisfactory, but by the time it came to my turn to be examined, one point stood out reasonably clear. Whether she had been named immediately or not, there was some kind of *prima facie* case against Ma E. It rested with her to shift the burden of proof on to shoulders other than her own.

This knowledge helped me through my evidence, which I was at pains to make as official and detached as I could. I described my visit to the scene of the crime. I mentioned the finding in the bathroom of a glass which might – or might not – have been used for the stuff that had caused Brendish's death. I gave it as my opinion that it would not show any signs of finger-prints as it was wet when I found it.

GREEN SANDALS

That was the only fresh fact that I could speak to. I explained that I had already questioned all the witnesses who had been examined. One thing I could speak to with certainty, and that was that Mrs. Brendish had lost no time in telling me that she suspected Ma E. When I come to look back on it this last was the one point I had determined to make absolutely clear before I sat down again.

Now, if ever, attention was focused on San Dun's wife who, labouring under suspicion, had not thought fit to put in an appearance at the inquiry.

'Not here, is she?' said Gower, when her name had been called in vain. 'What steps have been taken to get hold of her?'

I rose to my feet and gave the steps in some detail. The town had been scoured for her; neighbouring stations had been communicated with; the bazaar had been watched; every policeman in Mingin had been told to be on the look out for her. I related my visit to Khattak Shah and dwelt upon its result.

Gower frowned at his pen. 'Is there anyone here to-day who can speak to the woman's movements - who has seen her recently?' he asked.

'Not that I know of,' I returned, and something made me add, 'Unless, of course - ' and pull myself up and peer over the verandah rail into the compound below, where a crowd of natives squatted in expectant groups. There was no sign there of Khattak Shah, which I took to be a good omen, but even as I spoke, there crept up over the matting of the stairs from Heaven knows where a couple of elderly white-jacketed Burmans - man and wife -

GREEN SANDALS

who, called on to say what they knew, claimed to be acquaintances of Ma E's and to have travelled with the woman two days back by country boat to a village not far from Tawbya, at least ten miles away. According to them it was impossible for her to have been in Mingin at the time of Brendish's death. How they had learnt that Ma E was implicated was not clear, but they mentioned having heard rumours. They professed to know nothing of Khattak Shah, but I did not need to be told that it was the hand of Khattak Shah that had impelled them towards the Brendishes' bungalow in time for the inquest and, though I need not have done so, I blamed myself now for having let that monumental intriguer know how the land lay.

Gower was obviously affected by the straightforwardness of the couple, squatting there, with eyes respectfully downcast, fingering their rosaries. 'Are there any more witnesses?' he asked me wearily, when the elderly pair had withdrawn.

'That's the lot,' said I, and he sat frowning and twiddling his fountain-pen at the table, while we waited on his words and the punkah groaned dolefully overhead. It seemed hard to realize that this weighted creature was the same as the person I had seen the day before perspiring irresponsibly in damp flannels on the club tennis court, with his hair in his eyes. He spoke at last, punctuating his remarks with little taps on the table.

'The immediate cause of death,' he said, 'is quite clear. We have the Civil Surgeon's evidence that it was poison. That should ordinarily be sufficient to

GREEN SANDALS

settle that point, but, as the contents of the stomach have gone to the Chemical Examiner, I have decided to wait for the receipt of his report before passing final orders, especially as the circumstances in which the stuff was administered have not yet been shown. There are other subsidiary points, too, that need clearing up. The body may be buried – the sooner the better. The inquiry is adjourned for a week – till Saturday next, by which time the Chemical Examiner's report ought to be here. All witnesses already examined should be in attendance at my court by four o'clock. The woman, Ma E, must be found and produced at the next hearing.'

He wrote at length on the order sheet that lay before him, with his elbows well out, while, in the stillness, the punkah overhead seemed to be droning out a caution to those concerned as to the consequences of their failure to attend on Saturday next. Then he jerked his head up and looked straight at Mrs. Brendish.

'Let me tell you, Mrs. Brendish,' he said, 'that it might be well if your interests were watched on Saturday next by your legal adviser. Questions may arise. Tell him everything. Put everything in his hands.'

She uncovered her face and turned it rather helplessly in my direction. 'Questions! Legal adviser!' she murmured.

I named one of the Mingin lawyers. 'I'll ask Mr. Barretto to come round and see you, shall I?' I said.

She rose from her chair to her full height. 'Oh, not Mr. Barretto!' she said, as though there were a

GREEN SANDALS

hundred to choose from. 'Thanks, Mr. Gower. I'll think it over. I can go, then, can I?'

She turned and left us, like a queen, in her stark funereal white, passing, slow-footed, into one of the upstairs rooms through a green *purdah* that dropped whispering behind her.

We all began to disperse. The Burman bench clerk came stooping forward, possessed himself of the official record and glided noiselessly away with it. Staynes went down the stairs without a word. Shwe Lu, delighted to be able to control the servants in what was their own particular domain, shepherded David and San Dun relentlessly towards the nether regions. I picked up my hat to go, but Gower detained me for a moment. 'Half a second, Venne,' he muttered and, thrusting a cigarette under his untidy moustache, he lit it. Then he stretched his arms and legs and gave a sigh of undisguised relief. Through a cloud of smoke he regarded me questioningly.

'You think I did right to tell her to get hold of some lawyer chap?' he hazarded, rocking a little on his feet.

I told him that it was just as well.

'Poor soul!' he murmured, and stood in silence, humping his shoulders and sucking noisily at his cigarette. I hung on every word of his. I would have given almost anything to know what kind of first impression the business had left on his mind and how far his mouth would be shut by the knowledge that the case was not complete. I could see he was longing to express himself, and because, dis-

GREEN SANDALS

cretion and discipline prevailing, he smothered his words with gulps of tobacco smoke, I cursed him for a cold-blooded red-tapist.

In the end what he said was, 'You must make another effort to get hold of that woman Ma E. For the rest, I expect you know pretty well what you have to do.'

'I expect I do,' I grunted. I was not sure that Gower might not be hinting at measures more drastic than any I intended to take. It struck me that if, by any chance, he was trying to discover indirectly what I thought about the possibility of putting Mrs. Brendish under arrest, he was merely wasting his breath. I would have none of it!

His next remark brought my eyes suddenly round on him. 'Do you think she knows there's anything against her?' said he.

'She! Who are you talking about?' I demanded with my chin out.

He seemed a little surprised at the truculence of my voice. 'Ma E, of course,' he returned, showing me how little Mrs. Brendish's extremity figured in his thoughts. 'Who else should I be talking about? What's she keeping out of the way for? . . . If her husband turns up, why can't she? . . . She must have heard about it. Who else can have put that old couple on to us? She must know that if she won't come out into the open and clear herself, she'll be fairly in the soup!'

He spoke almost as though he *wanted* her to clear herself! He had got back to his cigarette for comfort, but a moment later he lifted his head again.

GREEN SANDALS

'Well, well, well!' he murmured resignedly. 'It's her look out, anyway.' He suppressed a heavy yawn and crooked his elbow to consult his wrist-watch. 'I must be off,' he murmured. 'Too late for tennis now, I suppose. I think I've earned a game of bridge, though. What are you doing, Venne?'

'I'm going home,' I said. It irritated me to see how much more it was Ma E's 'look out' than Mrs. Brendish's that appealed to him. I started to make a move for the stairs. 'Yes, confound the woman!' I exclaimed, as I set myself in motion. 'She's taking good care to keep out of our way. Precious poor fun for Mrs. Brendish if she manages to dodge us for good.'

He took me up quickly in a way I was to remember later. 'Poorer fun still for Mrs. Brendish, maybe, if she *doesn't* dodge you.'

'What do you mean?' I asked gloomily, turning half round towards him.

'How if you rope the baggage in and she's able to prove an alibi?' he demanded, and he allowed me to carry this last remark away with me down the staircase.

It was, oddly enough, precisely what I had once thought myself, but it came as a shock to realize that he should be so clear on the point too!

CHAPTER XXIV

GOWER's last words rang in my ears as I drove Gaway. The sun hung low on the blurred westward edge of a great blue and yellow wall of sky. Out on the bare *maidan* they were playing polo, raising a soft salmon-coloured cloud of dust that followed the distant patter of the hoofs from one end of the ground to the other. I skirted the broad stretch of turf, avoiding the few spectators who clustered where a some spare ponies stood flicking their tails in charge of Indian syces in white. For the moment I felt no desire to mix with my kind. I drove on towards the club, a long low dreary building with an ill-fitting red-shingled roof, and went in to quench a parching thirst. There was nobody indoors. All the members were still making the most of the cool of the evening in the open air. I was glad to have the place to myself.

A game of tennis was being played on the red laterite court in the rear of the building. I stood in the back verandah, glass in hand, and watched the tennis balls, black against the sunset, rocketing amateurishly above the top of the shabby creeper-grown trellis work that sheltered the players from view. I listened idly to the twang of the racquets and the calling of the score. My intention had been to fly from the club before the players came in from their game, but the last set finished before I was aware of the fact and I was still rooted in the verandah when a perspiring four tottered up the steps, clamouring from afar for drinks. They were Wheeler, Blake,

GREEN SANDALS

Miss Sarkies and a girl whom I knew by sight but not by name. Till their refreshment arrived the newcomers were, mercifully, dead to the world. They could only sink into chairs and nod speechlessly towards me and pant and stare fixedly in the direction of the bar. Presently, however, when the fire had been for the moment stilled, they were able to breathe and glance about them and identify themselves with their surroundings, and in due course Wheeler, attired in a fearsome blazer and with a white muffler round his neck, detached himself from his companions and edged up to my end of the verandah, agitating his tumbler as though to cover with the tinkling of his ice the sound of his going.

Arrived at my elbow, he glanced round once before speaking, then, with his back to the others, he asked with an air of privilege and mystery, 'How about it?'

He was a prim, self-satisfied fellow, prematurely bald, an unapproached singer of comic songs and somewhat of a general favourite. I don't know that we had any points of contact, unless it was in our dislike of that young puppy, Staynes.

I knew what he was talking about exactly, but had no intention of satisfying this rank outsider's curiosity. I suddenly made the discovery that Gower's attitude of reserve was the only decent one.

'Adjourned,' I replied shortly with my elbow well out, and would have swung away from him, but he detained me with his tumbler.

'Suicide?' he asked.

'It's adjourned, I say,' I growled. 'Not finished

GREEN SANDALS

yet. No finding. Chemical Examiner's report awaited.'

There was no shaking this limpet off. 'Not finished yet !' he echoed, raising his eyebrows behind his glasses. 'Chemical Examiner! Poison suspected then! It's as dicky as that, is it? Tell me, how did Staynes come out of it?'

'What did you expect?' I returned, and he nodded understandingly as though my reply had told him what he had expected - exactly. 'And Mrs. Brendish?' he went on, taking off his spectacles to wipe the perspiration off them. 'Pretty fishy, don't you think so, eh?'

I had meant to say no more, but I was not going to let this pass unchallenged. 'Not in the least!' I said. 'The case is perfectly clear, so far as we've got. All we've got to do is to get hold of a certain woman.'

'Ma E?' he inquired, and I found I had to nod assent.

'Ah, it's that way, is it?' he observed. '*Cherchez la femme* . . . Upon my word, I never thought it of old Brendish! Quite enough to make the *mem sahib* see red, I expect. No one can blame her for anything! Why, in France they'd be complimenting her from the bench! . . . Oh, yes, they've been talking about it in the bazaar!'

'I've no doubt they have!' I returned sourly. 'One can trust you *box-wallahs* to be on to anything of that kind!'

And with that I took myself off, leaving him to share with his companions such crumbs as I had been prevailed upon to drop. I could picture the four

GREEN SANDALS

heads shooting in together over a cluster of tumblers the very moment I had passed out into the warm dusk.

As I jogged off gloomily behind my grey I was cursing the mercantile community of Mingin for a crew of vicious scandalmongers. And yet, even before I had got home, I had to confess to myself that, on the ascertained facts, the matter gave warrant for nearly every ugly rumour that was flying abroad. God knows, there was no suspicion to the tune of which the gossips were giving tongue that I ought not, strictly speaking, to be entertaining myself.

There was nothing more to be done that evening but to send once more for Shwe Lu and make it clear to him that if he hoped for promotion he must see to it that Ma E was produced without fail before the following Saturday. I must say that he and his men worked during the next day or two like Trojans. It seemed to me that some one came every couple of hours or so to report progress. Four of the smartest constables were told off specially to loiter around all the more disreputable by-ways to glean what information they could. Each of them took one of the quarters of the Municipality. It was impossible to believe that Ma E could have poked her nose for a moment out into the street without a cry of recognition going up. Tawbya outpost was communicated with daily and two plain-clothes men were sent to the village to which Ma E was said by our elderly couple to have gone. Needless to say, the elderly couple themselves were rigorously shadowed.

GREEN SANDALS

All this detective business had, of course, to be done by Burmans. Never before had I been concerned with a case that touched myself so nearly; never had it irked me so to be entirely dependent on native subordinates. If I had been able to do some of my own private inquiry business, the next few days would not have dragged as they did. When I say 'private inquiry,' let me at once say that I have never claimed to belong to that adaptable British breed who, with a dash of stain and a few yards of white calico, can make up as Indian traders and mix unnoticed in the bazaar crowd. That sort of mummery was not for me. My figure, my gait, my speech, my down-sitting and my uprising, all would have given me away. What maddened me was that I had not even the opportunities of an ordinary European. A stroll that Staynes might have taken unobserved would have drawn all eyes upon me. I was known to every one by sight. I was a marked man. A sinister meaning would be attached to my most innocent question. My very appearance in a Mingin slum was ordinarily sufficient to send a third of the residents off the side-walk into the darkened shelter of their back rooms. And so I had to possess my soul in patience and idleness the next day and the four days following that. My sleuth-hounds drew blank. There was not a sign of the missing woman. Inquiry showed that her two witnesses were meek, law-abiding folk – shop-keepers in a small way of business, the last persons in the world, apparently, to be under Khattak Shah's influence. The reasons they gave for their presence at the inquest – good, amiable, neigh-

GREEN SANDALS

bourly reasons – passed muster. It was all most unsatisfactory!

During this period of pause and inaction I did not once set eyes on Mrs. Brendish. She was not present at her husband's funeral, which I attended, in company with a few Europeans, in the dismal, low-walled Christian cemetery outside the town. Public opinion, I could see, was reflected in the meagre muster of white folk that gathered round the graveside and dispersed in ominous silence after the ceremony. There were no flowers. A cloud seemed to hang over Brendish's death that paralysed sympathy.

Meanwhile rumour was active in regard to the movements of the dead man's wife. She was confined to her house but was busy enough, people said, behind its four teak walls. It was stated that she had already written to the auctioneers to have her effects sold and that Allagappa Chetty was wearing himself out in the law courts in obtaining attachment orders to defeat her object. Whatever she might or might not have done, I knew for certain that she had not called in any legal adviser. No one was admitted to her. She repulsed, with a white face and black-rimmed eyes, all attentions from outside. Gossips had it that Staynes had gone, with a mourning band round his arm, to pay the dues of sympathy and had been kindly but firmly shown the door. I should say that this last was the only satisfactory item of intelligence that reached me during those four or five troublous days.

About Thursday I began asking myself rather impatiently whether, after all, there wasn't something I

GREEN SANDALS

could do personally in the case. Mingin was obviously busy tearing Mrs. Brendish's reputation to tatters, and even if I couldn't potter in *pagri* and loin-cloth about the Strand Bank, picking up stray scraps of police news, I could at least ascertain whether Mrs. Brendish was preparing for Saturday's ordeal. She had not thought fit to consult a lawyer, but it revolted against my idea of the fitness of things that she should come to the adjourned inquest without a soul to advise her. I was shocked to think of the time that might be wasted while she formulated her case. I might be able to save hours of useless irrelevance by a few judicious words beforehand. Staynes had been sent to the rightabout – and very properly, too – he had no official status. The less he poked his nose into things the better. There was one nose, however, perhaps only one, that might legitimately be thrust, at this stage, into Mrs. Brendish's verandah, and that was mine . . . Why shouldn't I thrust it?

Why shouldn't I? . . . And then, again, as I asked myself, why should I? . . . How was I to know that Mrs. Brendish's own straightforward way of dealing with the business might not be far more convincing than the tortuous tactics that an advocate with a watching brief would be sure to adopt? Moreover, wouldn't a visit like the one I contemplated simply mean that I considered Mrs. Brendish to be in a really nasty fix? Did I honestly think that she would have any difficulty in clearing herself completely? . . . Was I a faithless cur? . . . Was my mind becoming poisoned?

It troubled me exceedingly that I couldn't shout

GREEN SANDALS

out unqualified answers to these questions. What I felt was that my present hesitating mood was all due to one fact, and that was that I hadn't seen Mrs. Brendish since the Saturday before. Those five days without a sustaining sight of her had been bad for me. I knew I had only to come once more within range of her fine trusting eyes to have all my measly doubts scattered, but failing that, the maddest of surmises plagued me. What I wanted was a renewal of faith.

I was sitting over my breakfast on Friday morning toying with my prawn curry and pondering my needs when I had a heaven-sent idea. No one had as yet prepared an official plan of the scene of the tragedy. All the Court had had to go upon so far had been Gower's slip-shod diagrams, which were below contempt. It occurred to me all of a sudden that I might be worse employed that morning than in making out a drawing to scale on the spot.

Once the scheme had got a footing in my mind it appealed to me as something most opportune, and I have an idea that I should have acted on the notion immediately had not an unlooked-for diversion arrived as I was smoking after my meal in the shape of Shwe Lu, who came up the steps of my bungalow, walking delicately (as anyone would do who ventured to disturb me in the middle of my after-breakfast cheroot) and yet evidently assured that his errand justified the intrusion. He could have seen me in the ordinary course an hour later in office. To rush in now could only mean that his business would not brook delay.

His slit eyes gleamed. He had got his words out

GREEN SANDALS

almost before he had finished his salute. 'Sir!' he announced breathlessly. 'She has been found, that woman, Ma E!'

Found! I discovered that I was puffing very hard at my cheroot. Now that the long awaited had come was I really glad? I almost doubted whether I was. 'Where was she found?' I demanded.

'She is seen with Ma Waing, sir,' he said. 'Ma Waing is that woman which gave evidence at the inquiry that Ma E is gone into the jungle with her.'

'I remember,' said I.

'There is one constable, Ba Chit,' he went on. 'It is his duty to look and watch where she goes in the town. He is just returned from his beat and informs that the said Ma Waing is seen two times to go to a brick *taik* in the Talaingdan quarter, with rice — yesterday one time, to-day one time, and Ba Chit reports that last time, by the door, the old woman is seen to talk together with Ma E quietly. Just for a moment, and then Ma E to go into the house again.'

'He's sure it was Ma E?' I asked.

In his eagerness Shwe Lu's lean hands quivered. 'He's quite sure!' he almost shouted. 'He's old acquaintance of Ma E, therefore will know surely.'

'Did he arrest her?' I demanded.

Shwe Lu threw me a half-reproachful look. 'Ba Chit has been given only orders to watch, not to arrest,' said he. 'Therefore,' he added with sudden officiousness, 'it will be necessary to arrest now.'

The creature was bobbing most unprofessionally before me, making play with his blue note-book, shifting from one ammunition boot to the other.

GREEN SANDALS

Somehow his eagerness, his glaring self-satisfaction, produced in me the very opposite effect to the one intended. I stared him up and down in a chill fit of perversity. He looked positively as though he expected me to spring brightly to my feet, pitch my cheroot into the compound and race off with him to the Talaing-dan quarter. I was going to do nothing of the kind. It irritated me to think that my conduct should have led him to imagine that I was so desperately – so personally – keen on Ma E's arrest as all that. I lay back in my arm-chair and made use of the ash-tray at my elbow. 'That's all right, Shwe Lu,' I said, and stifled a not very spontaneous yawn. 'Tell that chap Ba Chit to go back and keep an eye on the house. Come and see me about the case when I go down to office. There's no particular hurry about arresting.'

At my words his quiverings left the man and he stood gazing at me in dull despair. He was too well trained, however, to argue with his superior officer and, saluting regretfully, he turned about and tip-toed down the steps again.

I sat and smoked in feverish silence after he had gone. I did not blame myself for this little flourish of pig-headedness. Honestly, I wanted time to face the new facts. For the past few days I had thought of little else but Ma E's arrest. Now the assurance that I could lay my hands on her at a moment's notice opened up sobering avenues of reflection. Gower's last words came back to my mind: 'How if we succeeded to "rope the woman in" and she were able to prove an alibi?' The woman was there for the catching and for the first time I was really able to picture

GREEN SANDALS

her in custody, with handcuffs on, being closely questioned, answering shrilly, protesting this, proclaiming that – all ready to produce half a dozen more respectable citizens to show that she had not been in Mingin on that fateful Friday night! No doubt Ma E had reasons of her own for keeping out of sight, but had we guessed the right ones? Might not this restless peregrination be merely part of the drug-smuggler's ordinary routine? No, the possibility of her being able finally to clear herself could not be ruled out.

And in that event, where, in Heaven's name, would Mrs. Brendish be?

I remember that at this point a kind of anger against the dead man's wife rose suddenly within me. Why should she fight against the idea of suicide and go out of her way to drag Ma E into the business? Couldn't she see that she was damaging her own case more than hurting her victim by turning the lime-light on a woman in whose relations with her husband the gossips would only see a spur to crimes of wifely vengeance? She had only to hint that her husband's bankruptcy had wrought on his nerves and the conclusion that he had taken his own life would be irresistible. Why not let people come to that conclusion? . . . Mingin was half-way there already.

Of course I might have argued then, as, indeed, I argued later, that it was Mrs. Brendish's sheer honesty of conviction that kept her from the coward's way and the line of least resistance. I refused at that stage, however, to look at it thus and was still full of unreasonable thoughts when I finally went down to office.

GREEN SANDALS

There were several urgent matters to settle on first arrival. A dacoity had been committed a few hours earlier two or three miles up the river; there had been a big seizure of opium on one of the steamers. It was some little time before I was free to look into Brendish's case, and when Shwe Lu was admitted he was very different from the excited jack-in-office who had bearded me an hour earlier in my den. He had a frustrate hang-dog mien. My procrastination had played the devil. Our bird had flown!

It appeared that Ba Chit, the plain-clothes man – a coarse-haired, lumpish individual with a painful stammer – had gone back to the house where Ma E had been seen and had arrived there just in time to witness her departure, carrying a bundle. My gentleman had followed her along the road leading to the river and had watched her embark on the ferry steamer that plied between Mingin and Kanyin, a large village on the western bank. Having had orders to shadow the woman but not to arrest her or follow her out of his jurisdiction, Ba Chit had seen her safely on to the boat and had returned to report the matter.

Shwe Lu was as abjectly miserable as though the escape had been his fault instead of mine – as it indubitably was. I had to console him by making as light as I could of the matter. 'Send a wire to Kanyin station and have a look-out kept for her there,' said I. 'The odds are that she'll be back again in Mingin by the evening.'

Shwe Lu was not so hopeful. 'I think she is altogether absconded,' he said. 'Ba Chit also he thinks the same.'

GREEN SANDALS

'Why?' I asked.

'He reports that other time when he watched the talking between Ma E and the old woman that Ma E looked up and is recognized. Sir, she sees Ba Chit and to prevent him to know she put her hand before her face to cover it – like that!' Shwe Lu suited the action to the word and spread a skinny palm in front of his unattractive features, peering out from between his fingers to see how I was taking it. 'Like that!' he repeated. '*Amè!* All too suspicious for him to doubt about her!'

'Why didn't you tell me this before, Shwe Lu?' I demanded.

'Till now there has been no opportunity,' he protested, reminding me that if it hadn't been for my cutting his interview short that morning, he might have given me a great deal more information than he had.

I couldn't blame him, or Ba Chit, or, indeed, anyone but myself. In fact, after he had withdrawn his crestfallen presence and I was left alone under the office punkah, I began to feel that it wasn't really a case of blaming anybody. The idea of Ma E being able to vindicate herself had played so abominably on my nerves that I almost welcomed her disappearance for good. Let the woman vanish, and bad luck to her! Why not take the severest view of action so obviously prompted by an evil conscience?

By the afternoon I had actually begun asking myself whether things were not now definitely shaping themselves for Mrs. Brendish's benefit.

CHAPTER XXV

WHAT with one thing and another I had resolved by the evening to carry out my morning idea of paying a visit to the Brendishes' bungalow. I put a tape-measure in my pocket, for I had settled that the preparation of the plan of the scene of the crime was to be the ostensible object of my coming. It was to be paraded, at any rate, on first arrival.

Nearly all the glow had faded from the sky when I left my house on my errand. Only a dull red edging to the gloom showed in the west. The black tree trunks, like the lines on a spectrum, cut this long horizontal streak up into a number of lurid sections. The airless Cantonment roads were all deserted as I drove to my destination. I had purposely chosen a time when most of the Europeans would be installed for the evening at the club. I made for my objective by a circuitous route and slackened the pony's pace to a walk as I got into the road in which the Brendishes' bungalow stood. If there had been any indication that Mrs. Brendish had a visitor with her, I should not have ventured to drive in, but there was no sign of life in the abode of the dead when at last its roof showed up against the sky between the branches of the mango trees. I could see no lights, I could hear no voices. My wheels, that crunched slowly over the laterite, sounded painfully distinct.

I pulled up quietly under a dark porch. The first sound I heard was the thin, mournful, trumpeting of the mosquitoes high up under its sounding-board of a roof.

GREEN SANDALS

I called to attract the attention of a servant, but there was no one to reply. I sent my syce off towards the cook-house – where now I saw that a faint light glimmered – to fetch some one to me, and, as I sat there in my trap watching his white form moving through the gloom, while my pony stamped softly and champed at his bit – I was all at once aware of another white form emerging ghost-like out of the gloom of the verandah. Something more subtle than sight told me that it was the white of Mrs. Brendish's dress. She peered through the darkness. I could hear her passing her hands over one another.

'Who's that?' she asked.

'It's I – Venne,' I said. 'May I come in and have a word with you?'

She seemed to be drawing her breath in. 'If you like,' she said, in a carefully steadied voice that held no hint of welcome in it.

I got out of the trap, strangely stirred, trying to picture her face, hoping that soon there would be light enough to see it by. I came up towards her, fumbling with my feet at the steps in the obscurity. I could hear her quick breathing as I came closer. Then, when I was almost touching her, her voice came, 'Have you got hold of Ma E?' she asked.

'No, I haven't,' I confessed rather sheepishly, and she drew a deeper breath than any so far. 'Oh!' she faltered, as though that put an end to everything and left me with only one thing to do – to go.

'We've heard of her,' I went on, trying to make the best as well as the most of it. 'She has got away again though; she has bolted.'

GREEN SANDALS

'Bolted!' she echoed, dismayed.

'Yes, but only for the moment, I hope,' I went on. I waited for her final comment on this, but, though she did nothing to help me out, she did not upbraid me for my carelessness or send me to the right about, as she would have been perfectly justified in doing. I could not make out her features, but I could actually hear her heart beating. I could have put out my hand and touched hers quite easily. I could see exactly where it rested.

She did not ask me to come in or sit down. We stood for awhile opposite one another till, just as I was going to start about the plan of the house I had come to make, she began, there in the darkness that hid us from each other, to speak, of all things! about her husband's funeral. She wanted it to be known that she hoped in time to thank everyone who had written to her. She asked to be told who had been at the funeral. She did not, oddly enough, even seem to know who had read the burial service. It showed that I was her first visitor, but it struck me as extraordinary that she should talk like this about parsons and cards of kind inquiry, as though Brendish's death had been an ordinary affair, with friends round the bedside and the doctor in the next room. She obviously had no idea of how Mingin had been opening its mouth about it. I felt bound to utter some kind of warning.

'Mr. Gower's going into the case again tomorrow, you know,' I said. 'I had hoped to have got hold of Ma E by that time, but I'm afraid it's not to be. I can get another adjournment, if

GREEN SANDALS

need be, but meanwhile, Mrs. Brendish, I want you . . .

'Yes,' she whispered, placing herself, as I could feel, entirely at my disposal.

'Meanwhile,' I said, trying to make my voice ring as distinctly as it could in the gloom, 'I want you to consider how you will stand if nothing can be proved against the woman.'

'Nothing proved! But everything has been proved,' she murmured. 'Who else can it have been? . . . They've got my word. I saw her . . . just up there! I showed you the place. It was dark at the time, it is true, but I can't have made a mistake. And how about the poison she brought before? That ought to be enough.'

'Ah, but suppose it isn't enough,' I objected. 'You heard the story those Burmans told the other day, didn't you? — how they went out into the jungle with the woman shortly before your husband died.'

'Of course I did,' she returned. 'But surely you don't believe them!'

In the darkness I made a rueful grimace. 'It's a question of whether Mr. Gower believes them,' said I. 'Mind you, they seem a decent pair, not likely to be telling lies.'

Her breath, which had grown evener, suddenly quickened as though my remark had been put, like a pistol, at her head. 'Then you think,' she exclaimed, 'that Mr. Gower will believe that Ma E was *not* in the house when I . . .'

'We've got to face that possibility,' I told her gravely.

GREEN SANDALS

'Well . . . well . . . in that case . . . ' she faltered tentatively, and I knew her hand had gone searching up to her mouth.

I finished the thing for her. 'Well, in that case we shall be thrown back on other alternatives,' I said. 'Have you tried to get in touch with Mr. Barretto?'

'No,' she replied, and then she whispered below her breath, 'Other alternatives! I see! I see!' just as though I had said something extraordinarily discerning. She stood opposite me, dim and white and motionless. Presently her voice reached me again at its deepest. 'Come upstairs,' she said.

We stumbled up the steps in the darkness – noisily, for the coco-nut matting had been taken up and it was a case of bare boards. At the top of the steps I saw her arm pointing. 'That was where I saw her. Do you remember?' she said and then passed on. She fetched an oil lamp from an inner room, lit it, exhibiting in the light thus freshly called into being a tired ashen face, all lined. She pointed to a chair. 'Would you like the punkah?' she asked wearily.

'No thanks, not for me,' I made answer, and sat down opposite her. The lamplight showed up all kinds of things that wrung my heart. The verandah was in disorder – almost dismantled. There were signs of packing, cardboard boxes, an open trunk, heaps of paper, switches of straw, a higgledy-piggledy of string, all infinitely piteous. A woman's skirt had been thrown over the back of a near chair. One might easily have seen in this disarray tokens of pre-meditated flight. I hoped no other outsider but myself had seen it. The lines in her face, smudged in by

GREEN SANDALS

the lamplight, made her look ten years older than she was. Not that I minded that, though!

Her feet were tapping earnestly on the bare boards. 'Other alternatives,' she murmured, keeping me, in my inquisitive starings, steadily to the point.

'Yes, other alternatives,' I repeated, coming to myself. 'I wish you had got hold of Mr. Barretto and spoken to him about it. He might have suggested some of them to you.'

'I don't see why I should trouble Mr. Barretto,' she returned.

I tried to make use of Mr. Barretto as a kind of stalking horse under cover of which to get near my objective. 'I expect he would suggest,' I said, 'that your husband – that your husband may have –'

'May have done what?' she asked. 'May have done away with himself? Is that what you mean?'

'You know it has been hinted at,' said I.

'I know it has, and it's out of the question,' she declared with all her own misguided conviction.

'Why *do* you stick to it?' I objected almost petulantly. 'You don't realize all you might, Mrs. Brendish. People haven't spoken to you as they have to me. Women don't understand these things.'

She almost laughed in her misery. 'Oh, don't they!' she murmured.

'His business, now,' I went on, hating to feel how brutally I must drive my case home. 'He was practically a ruined man. Isn't it a fact that he couldn't meet his debts – Allagappa Chetty, you know, and all that lot? Can't you conceive his wanting to escape the – the disgrace?'

GREEN SANDALS

'Not in *that* way!' she assured me, as she had done before. Then she sat for awhile with her mouth working and the lamplight playing on her hands as she folded and unfolded them on her lap, just as, unseen to me, she must have been folding and unfolding them in the dark below.

Presently she spoke again, very deliberately. 'Oswald and I were a great deal to each other,' she murmured. 'More than you would think. . . . More than anyone would think. . . . I've wronged him in thought, yes, I have. . . . I imagined all kinds of things about him. . . . Horrible things. . . . Silly, abominable things. . . . You would laugh if I told you. . . . So absurd. . . . I can see it all now. . . . As it is, I can't bear to think how he can have let that – let her influence his life – come to him at night like that; but if it's really a fact that she just came up to see him . . . speak to him . . . bring him something . . . and did nothing else –'

She broke off, trying to focus her vision on a mental picture. Then she seemed to fortify herself with a little shake of her shoulders. 'No!' she declared in a louder voice. 'No! He couldn't – he wouldn't have done what you suggest, not without – well, I've told you already. . . . There was no message, and he would have left a message, unless –'

'Unless what?' I whispered hoarsely, for she had stopped again.

'Unless it was anything that I had done that drove him to it,' she went on. 'I should never, never forgive myself if I thought that! I couldn't bear to think it!'

GREEN SANDALS

I couldn't bear to either, and, at the risk of further pain to her, I tried to put other aspects of the matter before her. 'Very well,' I said. 'Put the question of suicide altogether away. Assume that we catch Ma E and that she satisfies Gower that she wasn't in Mingin when your husband died. What do you imagine he will think?—Mr. Gower, I mean.'

Her eyes looked very deep-sunken in the pale glimmer as she lowered her head. 'He'll think it's a case of suicide, but he'll be wrong,' she said, and her lips met firmly.

'Ah, but suppose you have convinced him that it wasn't a case of suicide,' I argued.

'I . . . I convince him?' she echoed.

'Yes, you,' I replied. 'Nobody else is trying to, anyway. Well, assuming that he thinks it wasn't Ma E but somebody else who did it, what do you think he will imagine?'

'What do you mean?' she demanded, and then, as a light seemed to break on her, she called out, 'Not San Dun, surely!'

'San Dun!' I ejaculated. 'Oh, Lord!' After this outbreak I sat for a few moments silent. How was I to put it to her so that she understood? I fumbled dully for the most merciful opening. I had been brutal enough already, but I saw now that I should have to be a great deal more brutal before I had delivered my message faithfully. The lamp flared whitely between us. Insects were beginning to gather and flutter against the fascinating globe. Every now and then one or other of us would have to raise a hand to brush some winged thing away.

GREEN SANDALS

At last I looked up. 'No, not San Dun,' I said, and then I burst out with a jealous cry that would have been hard to beat for brutality. 'What was Mr. Staynes doing at that time of night with you?' I demanded.

It was almost word for word what Gower had himself asked her at the inquest. It had been bad enough even then, put with sober magisterial detachment, but now it sounded insulting – abominable. Matters had reached a point when plain speaking was unavoidable, and yet if on hearing me Mrs. Brendish had risen to her feet and ordered me out of the house, I should have sneaked out without a word to say for myself.

However, she, in her kindness, took pity on me. She waited quite as long as I had waited before she spoke. Then, with unexpected calmness, as though willing to recognize that I was asking these outrageous things because I was paid so many rupees a month to do so, she said, 'It's that way, is it? Surely – surely no one would be foolish enough to imagine that *he* –'

I suddenly found that now had come the moment for my last word of warning. 'Or that you and he –' I muttered, just loud enough for her to hear, and then I leant forward with my elbow on the arm of my chair and put my head down on my hand, feeling that I had done my best for her, though at the cost of her refusing ever to see or speak to me again.

But she did not so refuse. It was as though what I had suggested was so new to her that she failed to grasp its vileness in full. 'What! that he and I . . .'

GREEN SANDALS

she murmured questioningly. 'You don't—you don't mean . . . Oh come! . . . A boy like that! . . . You don't mean to say you think . . .'

I lifted my head quickly. 'I've told you what I think about it!' I exclaimed.

'Well, what other people think,' she cried. 'You don't mean to say that they—'

Her breath caught with a click. By this time she had got the thing in full. Again there was a long—a miserable silence, while I fought for words as a choking swimmer fights for breath. At last I got a further word of warning out. 'I want you for your own sake to realize that it looks suspicious,' I said.

'Not suspicious to you, surely!' she faltered.

'Not a bit! Not a bit!' I assured her. 'But to people who don't know as much as I do.'

'I don't mind what the others think,' said she. 'What do you think?'

'I tell you I should like to think your husband took his own life,' I groaned.

'*Like* to!' she echoed. 'That means that you really think the worst—that he—Mr. Staynes—and I—Oh, my God!'

I had done it now! I must have huddled myself into a terribly abject position in my chair for I remember it suddenly came over me how absurd it was that I, the salaried inquisitor, who should have been sifting the whole business with merciless, hard-headed impartiality, should be sitting there humped in my chair in such a desperate taking! In any case, I know that my next words came out brokenly from under my hand in anxious self-justification.

GREEN SANDALS

'Why did you say that about blaming yourself to Mr. Staynes?' I asked.

'What do you mean?' she cried.

'He has told me more than he ever told Gower at the inquest,' I went on. 'Something that David heard. Something that you said to Staynes about having been mad. You can't imagine how it has been worrying me!'

'About being mad?' She was striving to carry her mind back and evidently found herself at fault. 'About having been mad? . . . I don't remember . . . It may have been. . . . Yes, I suppose. . . . But surely you never imagined! . . . So David heard it, did he? . . . I had forgotten he was there. . . . Well, don't you see? I *was* mad . . . Didn't I tell you just now I had wronged him — Oswald — in thought? Wouldn't anyone be mad who realized that a common bazaar woman like that should be able . . . Coming upstairs like that! . . . Sneaking about on tiptoe! But one can be mad with some one without doing anything to hurt him. . . . One's husband too . . . Yes, of course I was mad, but don't tell me, Mr. Venne, that you supposed for a moment . . .'

Her voice died away in the absolute hush of that dismantled verandah. We did not speak for a long time after this. When I come to think of it, she hadn't said much to explain things, and yet the next thing I remember was raising my head from my hands with the inward peace of one rising from his knees after a benediction. It was that impudent parrot repetition of David's that had all along been

GREEN SANDALS

my deepest torment. The few disjointed sentences she had uttered seemed to have explained it all away and – what was even finer – the mere fact of her being able to demolish this one suspicion was like an earnest of her ability to deal as fully with everything that fools might think looked black against her.

I wondered whether she hadn't been her own worst enemy all through – a reflection which made me exclaim as I rose from my chair, 'I wish, Mrs. Brendish, you hadn't destroyed that first lot of killing-bottle stuff the woman brought. If you had kept it, now, and been able to produce it –'

She saw through me. 'You mean,' she said, 'that you wish I hadn't told Mr. Gower anything about it?'

'Well, you hadn't any definite proof that it was poison,' I urged.

'Mr. Staynes wasn't sure, but I was,' she replied. 'Besides, how was I to show otherwise that she was in the habit of going about with stuff like that?'

By this time she seemed to have realized more fully the average outsider's point of view and to have seen how preposterous it was. She seemed almost inclined to rally me on my nervousness as to what people would think or say about her. 'Well, anyhow,' she went on a moment later, 'I see now you'll do your very best to get hold of the woman. You've shown you really want to help me.'

'Oh, I'm going to help you,' I said with an inward glow. 'But suppose she proves she wasn't there!'

She seemed almost ready to laugh at my timidity. 'You're frightened, you're frightened!' she said.

'Well, if I'm frightened, it's on your account,' I

GREEN SANDALS

returned. 'Do you know what I should like? It would be for the woman to disappear altogether and for you to say — well, you know what I should like you to say you think.'

My agitated persistence must have been maddening, but she made every allowance for me. 'Ah, that's simply because you don't trust me!' she declared. She took a step or two away from me into the darkness of the verandah, stood balanced there for a moment and then faced me again. 'Still, you mean well, you mean well,' her voice said kindly. I could just see her shaking her head. 'No, never suicide!' she murmured. 'Anything but that!' She took a step or two nearer me after this. 'Look here, Mr. Venne, you've simply got to believe in me,' she said. 'You get hold of Ma E. Leave all the rest to me.'

For a few seconds she had stood, mysteriously withdrawn into herself, outside the ring of light that the oil lamp shed round itself. Now, as she spoke, she moved revealingly forward into the irradiated circle with her lips parted and her haunting eyes fixed tolerantly upon me. It was an odd moment (after all this dreary heart-breaking talk) to choose for an angelic vision, but there it was! — I don't know whether it was the absurdity of my misgivings or the newly acquired certainty that she could trust me to the end that lifted the haggard mask from her face, or whether it was just a transfiguring trick of the lamplight, but for close on thirty seconds by the clock I had there, in that gloomy verandah, before my eyes a picture of nineteen years back. That care-worn widow stood there positively in the image of the

GREEN SANDALS

child I remembered, with a young face gloriously uplifted and a tender slip of a figure and white, appealing hands – all very straight and sweet and worshipful. It was like a sign from Heaven, and now, if ever, I knew that, whatever ill-wishers might say or do in her despite, nothing would ever again make me lose faith in Mrs. Brendish's pure innocence.

I know that at the end of the thirty seconds my chest was out, swelling with great resolves. 'You may trust me to do my best,' I said.

Five minutes later I found myself in my trap again driving away from the house through the warm darkness. I remember wondering idly, as I tickled my pony's back with the whip lash, whether I should have been held to have a second time betrayed my official trust, and adding, a moment later, for my own satisfaction, the assurance that I really did not mind now greatly if I *had* betrayed it!

CHAPTER XXVI

I HAD started out to see Mrs. Brendish in a state of nervous tension, avoiding my fellow mortals. I left her house again exultant, ready to outface all the gossips of Mingin. As I drove homewards through the night the lights of the club glimmered at me from the farther side of the *maidan* and reminded me of those less happily circumstanced than myself. I wanted to keep my finger on the pulse of Mingin and so I turned my pony's head in the direction of the twinkling.

Till I pulled up at the foot of the club steps I did not realize how long I had been with Mrs. Brendish. Most of the members had by this time left the building. I remembered to have crossed a few of them on the road, some in their traps, some walking, with hand-lanterns carried before them. I could hear a belated game of billiards clicking its dreary way in the billiard-room, and judged that Baird was one of the players, for the sole occupant of the long club verandah was Mrs. Baird. She was leaning with her elbows on a table, turning over the pages of an illustrated paper while she imbibed a frothing lime squash through a couple of yellow straws. Her carriage I could see, with its lamps ready lit, standing near the gate of the compound.

'You're late! You're late!' she called out at me as I came up the steps. 'Where have you been, Mr. Venne?'

An hour back I might have cast about for some evasive reply, but now, coming, as I did, uplifted

GREEN SANDALS

and sustained, I felt that every one was welcome to know the source of my exaltation. 'I've been to the Brendishes,' I said proudly.

'Ah, the Brendishes!' she observed. She conveyed herself and her drink close up and stood facing me, stout and vivacious, still steadily reducing the level of liquid in her tumbler. She was creased and moist and puffy, and I looked pityingly at her. I had known her, just as I had known Mrs. Brendish, in her girlish days, but, Heavens! *she* didn't make me see visions!

'Was she *darwaza band?*' she asked. Three times her sloe-black eyes jerked from her tumbler edge up to my face and back again and each time her jet ear-drops swung rhythmically.

I looked her up and down for a moment before replying, watching the throbbing of her stout, soft, yellowish throat, like the throat of a matronly toad. 'No, she wasn't,' I said at last. 'I saw her all right.'

She kept on sucking vigorously, with her gaze turned upwards towards me. 'You don't say so!' she mumbled between the gulps. 'Well, I must say you're a privileged one! She won't see me! . . . I went round to her place the other day, but she wouldn't see me!' For a moment she relinquished her straws to ask me a question. 'I say, Mr. Venne,' she said, 'is it true that she's leaving Mingin? There's all kinds of *gup* that she's packed up and ready to go. . . . They won't let her leave, will they?'

'I don't know who's to stop her,' I replied with some fire.

GREEN SANDALS

'I see,' she murmured. 'You mean they haven't been able to prove anything against her. . . . She says it was a Burmese woman who did it, doesn't she? . . . Was Mr. Staynes there when you went just now? Has he seen her since?'

'Not that I know of,' I returned shortly.

She continued to draw in her lime squash with hurried bubbings, keeping her eyebrows, as it were, raised at me to detain me, while her ear was set to note the progress of the game in the billiard-room.

I watched her cheeks hollowing and expanding, fascinated. Something curt in my last reply seemed to have conveyed a hint to her, for, when the last gurgling drops had reached their destination, she spoke with a new intent. 'Good gracious! I've no business to be asking you about it, I suppose!' she cried, placing her glass with a deep breath on a near table. 'You're the one person who's not allowed to talk about it—you and Mr. Gower. You Government officials! I'm sorry for you!' She shook a podgy commiserating hand in my direction. 'You're tongue-tied!' she declared. Then she added, as though pleased to think that no official gag had been placed in her own mouth, 'Well, I suppose I ought to be glad I wasn't called to give evidence at the inquest!'

'*You* give evidence! What could you have said, Mrs. Baird?' I demanded.

'Oh, don't ask me!' she exclaimed. 'Well, all I can say is that if it *was* a case of suicide, she knew well enough what was coming.'

'Impossible!' I said.

GREEN SANDALS

'Ah, it isn't impossible, Mr. Venne!' she persisted. 'She was dining with us that night, you know. . . . She came alone, without him. . . . She made her apologies for him. . . . "I'm so awfully sorry, but Oswald can't come," she said. . . . I asked her if he was ill, but she said, no. "Oh, he's all right!" she said, like that! "But I don't know what he's up to. In these days we must be prepared for anything!" she said. . . . I heard her.'

'Well, she knew he was badly hit,' I argued.

'Ah, but how did she know it was to be that particular evening?' was her rejoinder. 'Upon my word, I don't know what to make of it!'

'You're quite out of it, Mrs. Baird,' I said. 'Hasn't Major Priestley told you that she won't hear of its being suicide?'

'If that's so, it only makes it all the more mysterious!' she retorted. 'I don't want to bother you with shop and I don't want to be uncharitable, but really - !'

And, to avoid the temptation of unbosoming herself uncharitably to the head of the police, she took herself away from me at a sharp waddle into the billiard-room, penetrating a foot or two beyond the threshold, beyond which a custom (more ancient than the 'Old Guard' itself) forbade Mingin ladies to go. From here, with her ear-rings still wagging, she issued shrill exhortations to her husband to repeat a certain historical twenty-five break and come home to dinner with her.

She was out of my control before I could stop her, and five minutes later had left the club, an

GREEN SANDALS

example which I was not slow to follow. I hardly knew what to make of her confidence. It positively sounded as though the woman wanted to be called to give evidence at the inquiry. If she did, she should want in vain. I was determined to do nothing to import further misconception into the case. It was not that I was in the smallest degree frightened of anything she might say. I felt as bold as a lion in my new-won faith. A little earlier I should have jumped eagerly at anything that strengthened the case for suicide, but now I had had my vision and was content, so confident was I that Mrs. Brendish would be able — black as things might look — to prove her story.

I had a sense, when I thought of Mrs. Brendish, of watching some expert performing feats that to the ordinary being were little short of miraculous. I really almost enjoyed the feeling of seeing her faced with new obstacles to overcome. I hadn't a shadow of an idea how she was going to surmount them, but such was my trust in her after that talk in the lamp-lit verandah that I literally couldn't conceive her failing. She had told me to leave it all to her and I could do so now without a qualm.

And then, as I drew near my own bachelor quarters, I was more or less brought to earth again by the reflection that while I was to leave all the rest to her, there was one thing that I had still to do myself — that was to get hold of Ma E. Even now I will not say that there might not have been lurking a feeling in the back of my mind that if Ma E were not produced in time there might be some limit to the

GREEN SANDALS

extent of Mrs. Brendish's power of wonder-working. Much still rested with me.

It was not till I had had my dinner that they brought me a telegram from the Kanyin police station to say that Ma E had not been traced there. Kanyin hazarded a theory that she might have returned to Mingin. I hoped so, but thought the view a rather sanguine one.

CHAPTER XXVII

IT came over me somewhere in the small hours of the night, when one's brain is sometimes at its nimblest, that I had been a fool not to have got something out of Khattak Shah all these days. Since I had seen him last more and more evidence of his intimate traffic with Ma E had been accumulating in the police office. There was no object in letting this lie idle. The chances of getting the woman to appear on the Saturday afternoon were almost nil, but if anything more could still be done, it would only be by working Khattak Shah for all the rascal was worth.

I remember lying sleepless and perspiring under my mosquito nets, listening to the snoring of the *durwan* (who ought to have been awake) and the flap of a vagrant bat (which ought to have been asleep) while I framed forceful phrases in my best Hindustani for the confounding of the black bully of Salween Road. I could easily put the screw on. I could easily persuade him that if Ma E were not produced forthwith, his position, as her last-known protector, would be most unenviable – in fine, that harbouring a criminal was next door to having committed the crime yourself!

I fell asleep, if my memory serves me right, quite satisfied that I had the material for putting the fear of God into the smooth hulking brute and making sure of his co-operation.

I must confess that on awaking most of the cogency of my overnight case seemed to have evapor-

GREEN SANDALS

ated with the white mists of morning. At the same time, even when the sun had mounted and matters had assumed, in its glare, a far from hopeful aspect, the feeling still survived that Khattak Shah was absolutely my last card and that I could not face Gower in the afternoon without having made an attempt to play him.

It was not far off midday when, having broken the back of my office work, I picked up my sun hat and strolled off along the broiling river front. At the turning off to Salween Road, near a drinking fountain, I saw and was seen by the stout constable, Ba Chit, whose duty it had been to keep track of Ma E. He was gazing rather vacuously about him but roused himself as I drew near and opened his big stuttering jaws to tell me there had been no sign of the truant anywhere in his neighbourhood.

'Have you kept watch on Khattak Shah's house?' I asked in Burmese, and in reply he showed me that from where we stood we could just catch a glimpse of the piled white pyramids of sweet-stuff that marked it at the end of a shaded vista. He told me that his eye had not wandered once from that point since he came on duty.

'Is Khattak Shah in his house now?' I inquired.

'He is, sir,' said Ba Chit. 'He came from the south about two betel chews ago, walking fast, and went in by himself.'

I turned and strolled slowly up the road in the direction of the shop. Ba Chit followed me at a respectful distance.

The roadway was at its fullest. A procession of

GREEN SANDALS

bullock-carts was in dusty occupation of the centre of the track. Traders, coolies and loungers crowded the narrow footway on either hand. My follower and I, thanks to being on foot, passed almost unnoticed through the throng. I was careful to avoid all indication of being on the spot for any special purpose. I pushed along easily, keeping my eyes busy. And luck ordained it that, as I walked, I should become aware, on the opposite side of the road, of the elderly Mussulman I had last seen squatting with Khattak Shah in the latter's back room. He was walking in the same direction as myself. His red-stained beard, shining from afar like a danger signal, offered a conspicuous set-off to the vivid green of his *pagri*. He was a picturesque – almost an arresting figure. I could not have failed to notice him, and yet as we pursued our parallel courses up the road I found that it was not at him that I was staring but at a form that stepped a few paces in his rear, that of a slim upright woman in Indian dress whose head was completely shrouded in a white *sari*. A very ordinary woman. I had passed a dozen females in the last dozen minutes who were exactly like her . . . and yet, perhaps, as I looked closer, not exactly! There was something jauntily un-Indian about the swing of her arm, the turn of her elbow. I kept my eyes intently on her. Was I, by any chance, on the scent at last?

To disarm suspicion I looked away for a few moments and when I glanced back again the scent was already a trifle stronger. The woman had clearly some connection with the Mussulman and, before I

GREEN SANDALS

had covered twenty more yards I could see that red-beard, having sighted me across the traffic, was trying to hide that same connection, and that the veiled female, not enjoying her companion's scope of vision, was quite unaware of my presence on the farther side of the road and was failing to respond to his warning shrugs and twitches. His furtive efforts were at first directed to waving her back (I could see his hand flapping imperiously below his shoulder blades) and then, as her pace did not slacken, to speeding his own up and putting a greater distance between himself and her.

I took all this in as I stepped up the side walk, and before we were level with Khattak Shah's shop front my doubts were almost at rest. It was ticklish work dealing with a putative *purdah* woman in the open, in hot daylight. I ran every risk of outraging the feelings of the inflammable Mussulman community, but the risk had to be taken. I could not allow the woman to reach the shelter of a roof without challenging her. Mrs. Brendish's tortured face seemed to rise before me and strengthen my resolve. Here was nothing less than a last chance of helping her — miraculously offered. I quickened my steps, strode diagonally across the street, my movements more or less covered by the dust from the bullock-carts, and reached the entrance of Khattak Shah's house almost at the same moment as the red-bearded man and his lady friend. I should actually have been there before them had not the couple at the last moment detected my manœuvre and replied to it with a quick dash of their own which carried them

GREEN SANDALS

past the youthful shop-tender into the back regions a few seconds before me.

I passed in after them like a flash and immediately found my way barred by the owner of the house. His burly carcass appeared to fill the whole of the dingy little back room. He salaamed with shifty affability but would take no denial. His brown hand travelled from his creased forehead to his chin and rested caressingly on his swart beard. I tried to push him aside, but his bulk opposed me. He was at least two stone heavier than I.

'I want Ma E,' I said, trying to peer round him.

He gazed at me as though he had no idea what I was talking about. 'It was Din Muhammad who came in just now,' said he.

'There was a woman with him!' I exclaimed.

'A woman?' he echoed, wrinkling his forehead more than ever. Still barring my way, while I glared impatiently at him, he seemed to be turning my intimation over as something that called for deep reflection. 'It may have been his wife,' he observed at last with the air of having done a lot of brain cudgelling simply to oblige me.

'I want to see her!' I shouted.

'She is a *pardah* woman,' he objected. 'How can I ask him to show Your Honour the woman?'

He shifted with uneasy stubbornness this way and that in front of me, scratching his beard and grinning as though anxious above all things to accommodate me, but at the same time asking me to realize how unreasonable my request was. At last, when he had given his confederates what he considered sufficient

GREEN SANDALS

time to make their dispositions under cover of his elephantine shoulders, he heaved his body to one side and gave me a glimpse into the room behind him.

It was empty, as, indeed, I had expected to see it. At the farther end of it bare wooden steps led to an upper storey.

'Where is Muhammad Din?' I asked. By now I had had time to get my breath and to recognize that, having run my quarry to earth and got the woman boxed within four walls, I could afford to take my time over the rest of the business.

Khattak Shah righted about deliberately, groped hither and thither in the darkness and, picking up a stick from the floor, smote with it deafeningly upon an empty packing-case. 'Oh, Muhammad Din!' he bawled.

No response came till he had struck three or four times, making the house ring to its corrugated iron roof. Then a sound of movement reached us from overhead. The planks creaked, a green *pagri* showed. The red-bearded one appeared at the top of the steps, pushed his mean staring head out over the balustrade, withdrew it, stood for a moment irresolute and then came down slowly, step by step, and faced us, blinking. He was obviously playing for time.

'Who was that you came in with just now?' I demanded.

He stared at me open-mouthed for awhile before replying. 'That was my wife,' he said.

I was not in the least impressed by this cor-

GREEN SANDALS

roboration of Khattak Shah's version. Standing at the top of the stairs, out of sight, he could have heard every word that had passed between Khattak Shah and myself. 'I want to see her,' said I.

'She is a *pardah* woman!' cried Khattak Shah again, as though that settled the matter for good and all.

'She is a *pardah* woman!' echoed his companion, but mechanically – in parrot fashion, as though for his own part he attached no great importance to the protection of the veil. All in a flash it came over me that – *pardah* or no *pardah* – Muhammad Din might be so arranging matters that a search of the premises would be void of result. Till then, like a fool, I had not thought of a back entrance to the tenement.

'*Purdah* be damned!' I called out in good English, and seeing there was not a moment to lose, I jumped past the natives towards the steps. I went up them three at a time and found myself in a narrow boarded passage that led to the rear of the house. There were curtained doors in the wall on either hand, but my eyes were not for them, nor for the scarlet and yellow hangings that shrouded them discreetly, for straight ahead there was a sunlit aperture which appeared to lead out into the open. As a matter of fact it took me out on to a back verandah on to which the noonday sun beat down fiercely. A crazy bamboo ladder sloped from this erection down to the level of a back drainage space that stretched away between rickety hovels – empty of life save for a yellow pariah coiled sleeping in the shade. Now I saw why Muhammad

GREEN SANDALS

Din had offered no violent opposition to my rush. I might look as I liked behind the scarlet and yellow curtains I had just passed, but I should look in vain. Red-beard's companion had obviously taken advantage of this egress in the rear, and in those precious seconds while the men played with me below had fled out of sight along the back drainage space.

With a groan of disgust I faced round, bounded back along the passage and went at a run down into the back shop, determined to have it out with the Mussulmans. How I was to deal with them I could not say, nor did I need to think it out, for, before the topmost stair had touched my feet, I realized that, brief as my absence had been, the situation below had developed with lightning swiftness while I was away. Khattak Shah and Muhammad Din were standing in the inner shop, with their backs turned to the steps and me, gesticulating fiercely and trying to hustle some one out of the premises into the street. I had a glimpse of a khaki regulation back that wriggled resentfully, of a drab uniform cap, of collapsing pyramids of confections and of the flutter of a white *sari*. I plunged headlong into the *mêlée* just as the natives had achieved their object, and was faced by the sight, on the pavement, in the centre of a knot of spectators, of the couple who had just been thrust out of the house — Ba Chit my invaluable constable and a veiled Indian woman.

My heart, which had sunk low, gave a thump of revival. I saw in a moment what had happened. My constable, following in my tracks, had witnessed

GREEN SANDALS

my pursuit of Muhammad Din and the woman in white into the shop and, being well versed in the back door wiles of the residents of Salween Road, had found his resourceful way up a side alley into the drainage space precisely in time to lay hands on my lady as she emerged from her bolt-hole in the rear of the dwelling. He stood there, rubbing an elbow that had come to damage in the process of ejection, but with a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

'*Shabashi!*' I cried, and patted him on the back, and then, without further ado, I whisked the white *sari* off his captive and was rewarded by the sight of a glossy Burman top-knot and of a yellowish, high-cheek-boned, non-Indian face – the very face I was after. It was Ma E sure enough!

The game was up, and no one knew it better than the woman herself. It had been a touch-and-go business. The clustering crowd – mostly Indians – might have been nasty if I had had the bad luck to expose the features of a Punjabi matron, but at the sight of this impudent masquerader, they ranged themselves unreservedly on the side of law and order. I had only the two Mussulmans to deal with.

I turned exultingly towards them. Muhammad Din was clawing his stained beard in undisguised panic. Khattak Shah had thought it wise to create a diversion by raising an injured hullabaloo over the wrecking of his stall. His wares were here there and everywhere in the dust and he and his boy assistant were plunging hither and thither, trying to retrieve them from under the feet of the passers-by.

I raised my voice. I pointed a finger at the re-

GREEN SANDALS

vealed woman. 'Is this your wife?' I inquired of Muhammad Din with fine sarcasm.

He was speechless, but managed to shake a negative with his wagging head.

I turned to Khattak Shah. 'Do you know this Burman?' I asked.

He was quite equal to the occasion. He had just salvaged a quantity of jaggery. He stood sideways opposite me, his big hairy hands overflowing with dusty brown balls, his eyes bulging with wrath and discomfiture, but he swung round at my question and subjected Ma E to a merciless scrutiny. Up and down his glance travelled – over and over her, as though she were some outlandish exhibit. Then he faced me again. 'I have never seen her before in my life, Sahib,' he declared.

'She is not the Bibi Jan you spoke of the other day, I suppose,' I went on, with an indulgent grin.

'No, she is not!' he snarled. He kicked viciously at a pariah dog which was investigating the scene of the disaster with an eye to its own benefit and disappeared with his jaggery into the shelter of the shop.

I glanced at Ma E. She did not consider this brazen disavowal worth more than a shrug of her flat little shoulders. Being thrown overboard was just part of the game for her. Indeed, what was she to gain by establishing a connection that could at best be but shady? She drew her *sari* over her head again to hide her incongruous face from the onlookers and stood there awaiting her fate.

GREEN SANDALS

I touched Ba Chit on the shoulder. 'Call a *ticca gharry*,' I said.

As it happened, one of our frowsy Mingin hackney carriages was rambling aimlessly within hail. It clattered up, a heat-blistered broken-sprung packing-case of a thing, drawn by a wheezing Burman pony; it halted at the edge of the roadway. The shock-headed Madrasi driver dropped from his seat aloft like an organ-grinder's monkey and flung open the door of the conveyance.

'In you get,' I said to Ma E, and pointed, and in she got, only too glad to escape from the stares of the crowd which, gathering in strength on the pavement, went back, grunting and grinning, before Ba Chit's waved truncheon and shouts of authority.

I jumped quickly in after the woman. 'To the *thana*!' I shouted. The door slammed on us. Ba Chit sprang up on a perch in the rear of the vehicle. The driver started his pony at a run from the ground and scrambled swiftly to the box while the *gharry* was bouncing crabwise in and out of the ruts of the roadway. Roads were not a strong point about the Mingin Municipality.

CHAPTER XXVIII

MAE sat opposite me with her head demurely shrouded. I could see nothing of her but the two thin brown fingers with which she held the white folds tight. There was a green jade ring on one of them. I had not expected her to show herself at all during our drive, but before we were far along the Strand Road she threw back her unaccustomed head covering with a gesture of resigned disgust and peered up at me with a sullen twist of the mouth. She evidently wanted to take stock of me and of the situation and to measure up her chances. I had not meant to speak to her in the *gharry*, for the venetian shutters were rattling hideously and conversation was difficult, but the sight of her face suggested to me that if I struck while the iron was hot I might get more out of her then and there than in the formal surroundings of the police station.

It was no use letting her try to pose as an injured innocent. That would only waste time, and time was terribly short. I began briskly, putting my head close to hers.

'I have been wanting to speak to you for some time, Ma E,' I said. 'You had better tell me everything.'

I could smell the coco-nut oil on her hair as she shook her head. 'I know nothing,' she said. 'There is nothing against me.'

'There is plenty against you,' I assured her. 'Listen. Three years ago you were living in Mandalay with a man named Maung Shan.'

GREEN SANDALS

She had not expected to be treated so soon to this bit of ancient history, but she gave a murmur of grudging acquiescence.

'You were charged in Mandalay together with Maung Shan with receiving stolen property,' I went on.

'I was acquitted,' she said.

I corrected her. 'You were discharged, not acquitted,' said I. 'Maung Shan got three years' rigorous imprisonment and when he went to jail you came down to Meiktila.'

It was her turn to correct me, as I had intended she should. 'Not to Meiktila, to Myingyan,' she muttered.

'To Myingyan first,' I agreed. 'But afterwards to Meiktila, where you sold in the bazaar. You were suspected there of dealing in *ganja*.'

'Nothing was proved against me,' she urged.

'You are quite right,' said I. 'Nothing was proved against you, but a man you had dealings with got a year — Kishen Singh, I don't suppose you have forgotten him.'

She showed me she had not forgotten Kishen Singh and I continued my biography. 'From Meiktila you went to Rangoon,' I said, 'and spent six months there with —'

'I was never a month in Rangoon!' she protested. 'The police have been lying about me!'

'Well, anyway, you have been living for over a year with San Dun in Brendish *thakin's* compound,' I observed. 'As you know, it is in connexion with Brendish *thakin's* death that you have been arrested.'

GREEN SANDALS

'Brendish *thakin*?' she repeated, and her black eyes seemed to reproach me for having been such an unconscionable time in coming to the point. . . . If that was all! . . . She started to fumble under her white coverings. She tugged out a small paper parcel and thrust it straight into my hand.

I turned the thing over and over. I thought it was a packet of cocaine and naturally assumed that this sudden delivery was part of what I should certainly have called a very adroit plan for fathering the ownership of the drug on the graceless scamps who had just publicly repudiated her. A testing press or two, however, showed me that there was nothing like powder in the package, which proved, in point of fact, to be a roll of currency notes, wrapped in a sheet of very dirty note-paper.

'What's this?' I asked. It struck me that it might be nothing more interesting than a bribe, though, even so, it was gratifying for me, in all my groping uncertainty, to have proof that there was actually enough against the woman to make it worth her while to go in for palm-greasing on a generous scale.

She soon disabused me, speaking slowly, hesitatingly, plaiting a corner of her foreign head-gear as she spoke.

'It is money,' she said. 'It is money for drugs. . . . It is money Brendish *thakin* gave me. . . .'

'Gave you!' I echoed. My breath came and went. So there was something, then, in Mrs. Brendish's theory, after all!

She hastened to add a qualifying phrase. 'He

GREEN SANDALS

did not give it me himself' she declared. 'He told me to come and fetch it.'

'Where did he tell you to fetch it from?' I demanded.

'From his house,' was her reply.

At this I discovered that the rattling of the *ticca gharry* was threatening to rob me of something I couldn't afford to lose. I let all the pestilential venetians down to stop their din. I leant out and shouted to the driver to proceed at a foot's pace. Then, in the comparative quiet that ensued, I put my face close to Ma E's again, so as to miss nothing.

'Did you come to the house last Friday?' I asked.

The days of the week were nothing to her. She reckoned, as usual, by the moon. 'It was the night of the third waning,' she told me.

'What was the money for?' I asked.

'For cheroots I had rolled for him,' said she. 'Three hundred Donabyus - big ones, the best kind. . . . Cheroots and other things.'

'What time was it when you got to the house?' I inquired.

'About young men's courting time,' she replied.

'And did you see the *thakin*?' was my next question.

She nodded and gulped and put her hands together, just as San Dun had done in the cook-house a few days earlier. 'It was after dark,' she informed me, panting a little. 'There was a lamp burning, but I could not see very well. I did not know that he was dead when I saw him first. . . . He was sit-

GREEN SANDALS

ting in a chair, like this.' And, as though to prove her case, she disposed herself on the seat opposite me in a way that showed me she had seen the very thing with her eyes.

'Sit up!' I growled. 'Well, what happened then?'

She straightened up quickly. 'I thought it was *ganja* or opium he had taken,' she went on, leaning so close that all I could see of her was the whites of her eyes and her teeth. 'I did not wish to trouble or wake him. He had told me to come and fetch money, and there was money there, on the table beside him.' (I could feel her patting the notes on my knee.) 'I thought he had put it there for me. I took it away.'

'How much did he owe you?' I demanded.

'I was frightened,' she answered, parrying delicately. 'I meant to pay back all that was in excess of the debt.'

'Did you go away then?' I asked.

'Yes,' said she. 'I heard the *thakinma* coming and I went out of the house. I was frightened. I thought perhaps the *thakinma* would —'

'Would do what?' I said.

She hesitated — pulled at her *sari*. 'The *thakinma* hated me,' she muttered. 'I was afraid she would say it was I who had given the *thakin* the white stuff that had made him sit like that.'

'White stuff!' I cried. 'How did you know that it was white?'

'There was a glass on the table beside him with some white stuff at the bottom,' she replied. 'I thought it was that he had drunk.'

GREEN SANDALS

'Why should the *thakinma* have thought you had given it?' I demanded.

'Because it was like some stuff I brought once wrapped up in paper,' said she.

'When did you bring it?' said I.

'Some time ago,' was her answer. 'The *thakinma* found that stuff and kept it. They say in the bazaar that it was white stuff like that that caused the *thakin's* death. That was why I thought the *thakinma* would say I had given it.'

And, having said her say and evidently not liking the look of my face, with a quick flick of the cloth she shrouded her head again.

I drew a deep breath when I was, so to speak, alone again, and looked out of the *gharry* window. As luck would have it, we had reached the precise point where, near a spruce white-washed pagoda, the cart road to Kanyin, a dusty uninviting track, branched off from the main road leading to the police station. From where I sat I could see this highway stretching stiffly across the yellow paddy plain, towards a distant blue line of jungle, its course marked by piled heaps of red laterite, a bleak succession of black telegraph posts and an occasional cluster of thatched huts. I glanced back at the shrouded figure, sitting very upright on the *gharry* seat opposite me. What Ma E had told me she presumably intended repeating at the adjourned inquiry. What she had said bore out in the most amazing fashion so much of Mrs. Brendish's story as had hitherto lacked confirmation. In a way it strengthened Mrs. Brendish's case, but again, in a way, it damaged it

GREEN SANDALS

so hopelessly that all at once it occurred to me that, if I really wished Mrs. Brendish well, the best thing I could do would be to stuff the currency notes back into Ma E's hand, hustle her swiftly out of the hackney carriage and bid her disappear for good and all, letting her absence from the inquest tell as it might against her!

'Shall I? . . . Shall I?' I remember whispering to myself with my hand quivering on the door handle, and then, a moment later, more anxiously, '*Can I? . . . Can I?*' It wasn't till after I had decided that — whether or not it were physically possible — it wouldn't really be playing the game that I recollected that I should, if I indulged in tricks of that kind, have Ba Chit on the rearward perch as well as the Madrasi driver on the box to reckon with. In justice to myself let me say that these two didn't really weigh with me at the supreme moment. In any case, that supreme moment found me removing my hand from the door handle and trying to blot out the picture I had already conjured up of Ma E speeding away across the paddy fields, with her head down and her green sandals swinging in her hand.

Silence reigned in the *gharry* while it toiled, with all its woodwork creaking, along the main road, past the tanks and the monastery and the jail, until the police station was reached.

We stopped opposite the wooden steps leading up to the station lock-up. We were barely at rest when the door was flung open and I was aware of the guard writer's yellow face peering in. It was too

GREEN SANDALS

late for me to turn back now. If Mrs. Brendish was in for it she was in for it!

A moment later the guard writer and I were standing side by side by the *gharry* door and Ba Chit and the driver near the pony's head with something of the air of receiving a distinguished visitor.

Ma E got out into our midst.

'Take this woman,' I said to the guard writer. 'Have her sent to the District Magistrate's court in two hours' time.'

The guard writer (he was a lean, cadaverous fellow) was quite unprepared for this visitation. For quite awhile he gazed, open-mouthed, at the inappropriate face which Ma E had exhibited, with dramatic suddenness, at my bidding from under her Indian head-covering. Then coming slowly to himself, he turned from her to me. His official memory came into play. 'To the inquest on Brendish *thakin*?' he asked.

'That's it,' I made answer. 'Tell Shwe Lu about it. It's his case. And while you're about it, pay for the *ticca gharry*.'

Then I walked back to my office in a smother of feelings, but supremely conscious of one thing — that was that if evil came to Mrs. Brendish out of Ma E's arrest, it would not really be my fault. It was she who had been so keen on the production of the woman. I, at any rate, had done nothing but my official duty.

CHAPTER XXIX

LET me confess, to my shame, that I spent a Lcoward's hour between the time of Ma E's arrest and that of the inquiry. Reviewing the matter, now that the evidence was complete, I tried, as I prowled, sweating, up and down the verandah of my bungalow, to accustom myself to the horrid knowledge that ninety-and-nine persons out of a hundred, placed in possession of the facts, would inevitably conclude that Mrs. Brendish had somehow brought about her husband's end by means of the white stuff Ma E had once brought in a twist of paper.

I began by feeling a dull contempt for the ninety-and-nine. I could see them scratching their stupid heads and drawing the clumsiest of inferences and, if it hadn't been for the fear lest Gower himself should be scratching his head to the same tune, I should have almost felt disposed to laugh at their abysmal lack of vision. But, as the afternoon dragged on and the verandah grew hotter and hotter and it became clearer than ever that Gower must be included in the dense majority, my scorn left me and sheer fright took its place, for in very truth Mrs. Brendish had a devilishly plausible combination of facts to fight against. Every one — Priestley, Staynes, Wheeler, Mrs. Baird, even Gower himself — had pointed a suspicious finger at her. David, too — that shuffling, stuttering David, with his pigeon English gabblings, had done her cause no good . . . and now, on the top of every one else, Ma E, making assertions that I did not believe but could not dis-

GREEN SANDALS

prove! . . . Could it possibly be that there was really something in it?

Again and again I assured myself that there was absolutely nothing. And yet, though my faith in Mrs. Brendish's innocence was not a whit abated, the feeling that the dice were loaded against her grew till there was a moment when, though the heat was a mere nothing, my head felt like bursting and for a time everything seemed to go black all round me, and I began to doubt whether I should be able to face the inquiry. It wasn't so much Ma E's new story about white stuff at the bottom of the tumbler by the body that troubled me – though, God knows, that was worrying enough. I was convinced that Mrs. Brendish would even yet be able to show how the glass had been washed and put in the bathroom. It was an altogether different matter that confounded me. Why had Ma E been so unexpectedly amenable in the *gharry*? Why had she been so quick in producing those currency notes? It would have been easy for her, if it had suited her book, to show she had not been near the house when Brendish died. Mightn't that account of her night visit have been produced simply and solely because it gave her a chance – as the first known person on the scene of the tragedy – to sling mud at Mrs. Brendish? 'The *thakinma* hated me!' she had muttered, fingering her veil. Wasn't that just another way of saying that she hated the *thakinma*? Priestley and the others were wrong-headed, but they were not wilfully vindictive. Here was something that bore the mark of deliberate malice. What of Mrs. Brendish's chances

GREEN SANDALS

when confronted by an enemy who, to wreak her vengeance, was ready, not only to disgorge her takings, but also to draw suspicion on her own head?

It was a relief when four o'clock came to put an end to my distracted prowling. At the prospect of seeing Mrs. Brendish again my courage revived, for I remembered that the others would see her as well as I and it seemed unthinkable that anyone who had had that privilege could connect her in any way with anything that was not high-hearted and right-minded.

Walking towards Gower's bench along the verandah of the red-shingled District court-house, I almost trod on Ma E who was squatting on the flooring, folded into herself like a clasp knife, on her haunches, in charge of a Burman policeman in khaki. Never had I seen her looking so puny or so despicable. She held her hands guiltily, with fingertips joined, and bent her glance on the teak boards as I strode past, but for all her pose of humility I knew her to be a dangerous cat with claws only momentarily sheathed. She was all prepared to use them in due course. I noticed that already – how I cannot say – she had managed to get into Burmese clothes again. I could see the respectable couple who had testified for her before busy with their rosaries at the far end of the verandah and guessed that, if the claws were to be used, there would be no need for them to speak to an alibi.

I took my seat in the Magistrate's room on one of the chairs provided for Europeans. Priestley was

GREEN SANDALS

already there. Staynes followed me closely, nodded in my direction and settled himself near the advocates' table, close to the door, biting his finger-nails with a troublous air. There was an empty chair by his side and when, a little later, Mrs. Brendish made her appearance, dressed in sober white, looking a little stern under her sun hat, he stopped his feverish nibbling, half rose to his feet and indicated the vacant seat. I watched her with jealous eyes and was a proud man when, with a quick renunciatory head-shake, she walked past him and dropped into a seat beside me.

It came as naturally as if I had been her legal adviser, to counsel and uphold. From that moment I asked for nothing more. She looked to me to see her through her ordeal and now, in the light of her countenance, that task, which an hour back had looked so hopelessly beset, became something within the bounds of my competence.

With her there beside me I barely noticed Gower's almost furtive arrival, but I gradually came to a sight of him, perched there on the bench, a good deal more at ease, one could see, than on the last occasion, with his own familiar punkah grinding over his unkempt poll and his own precious books of reference in a revolving book-case within reach.

Presently I was aware of his voice bidding me call the first witness. He left it to me to determine the order of appearing and I began with Priestley, who read the Chemical Examiner's report. This was short and to the point. It confirmed Priestley's own provisional opinion. It was cyanide of potassium,

GREEN SANDALS

sure enough, that had somehow got into Brendish's stomach.

Certain ground previously skimmed over had here to be covered again. 'Could it have been administered in food?' Gower asked with a sigh.

'Quite easily,' said Priestley.

'In the last meal he took?' Gower went on.

'Yes,' the Civil Surgeon said. 'Or else a little before or a little after.'

'Hardly before,' muttered Gower. 'I don't think we need consider before,' and he went frowningly over his papers to look at the evidence already recorded. 'I must have that cook again,' he declared after a deep breath.

He had already at the first hearing asked San Dun a number of questions, all based, I could see, on the charitable assumption that Brendish had taken his own life. Now, however, he saw himself forced to cover more unpleasant ground. San Dun, having succeeded Priestley in the witness-box, was called on to describe the precise composition of Brendish's last meal and warned to be very careful. He had on the previous occasion named the *menu* (chicken cutlets and caramel custard). It now appeared for the first time that there had also been a little anchovy toast.

'Did you bring the things you used for cooking straight from the bazaar?' Gower inquired.

'Some of them,' said San Dun. 'Some the *thakinma* gave me out of her store cupboard – sugar and some spices.'

'Sugar and some spices. . . . HMMMMM!' Gower

GREEN SANDALS

seemed to be thinking hard while he scribbled on his deposition form. 'What happened to what was left of the food when it was taken away?'

'There was hardly anything left,' said San Dun. 'What there was was thrown away. No one else ate of it.'

'Mrs. Brendish was dining out that evening, was she not?' Gower continued.

San Dun assented briskly. 'She told me first that the *thakin* would be going out to dinner with her,' said he. 'Then, when it was time to leave the house and the *thakin* was absent she told me to prepare a meal with what there was in the kitchen to give him when he came back to the house.'

'Was it then that she gave you out the sugar and the spices?'

'Yes.'

'Did the *thakin* come back later?'

'Yes, after the *thakinma* had left. By that time I had got something ready for him to eat.'

'What did you use when cooking the dinner?'

'The things I had just had given me. There was not time to prepare very much.' San Dun rolled his eyes round as though challenging any member of the assembled company to produce as good a scratch meal as he at a moment's notice.

Gower took San Dun's statement down at what I now knew was unnecessary length and then looked up at the figure that was seated by my side. 'You understand what the man has been saying, I suppose, Mrs. Brendish,' said he. 'Have you any question to ask him?'

GREEN SANDALS

She straightened herself in her chair. 'Any question?' she repeated. 'No. It's quite right what he says — quite,' and Gower with a shadow of a shrug indicated to San Dun that he might stand down.

He bit for awhile at his pen after this and then addressed me. 'Has that woman Ma E been found?' he asked.

'I arrested her this morning,' I replied.

'Have her in then,' he ordered.

Ma E crept, as cat-like as ever, into the witness-box, with her body bent and her joined palms well to the fore. She seemed to be holding herself in, but only so as to make her final pounce more effective. Over the top of the rail she peered unblinkingly at the lot of us. She gave her name, age and residence (the last not, by the way, in Salween Road). She named San Dun as her husband, and when San Dun himself bleated a passionate denial from the back of the court, stuck to her point and, while admitting that she had not lived with him for two months, cried out that there had never been a divorce. For a brief space there was quite an unedifying altercation over the matter.

Gower finally came to business. He pointed his pen at Ma E. 'Where were you on the night of the third waning?' he demanded.

Ma E gave Mrs. Brendish a cautious deliberate side-glance before replying, just to show that she was well aware at whose instance she had been haled before the court. Then she faced the bench and, for a Burman and a woman, she wasted very little time, I must confess, in coming to the point.

GREEN SANDALS

'On the afternoon of the third waning,' said she, 'I went to buy tobacco for cheroots to Duyinzeik. I travelled with U Lu and Ma Waing of the Talaing-dan quarter. We went in a country boat together. I went to Ko Lat's house in Duyinzeik and bought the tobacco, and about sunset I came down stream in Ko Lat's uncle's boat back to the town.'

'What time did you arrive in Mingin?' asked Gower.

'At young men's courting time,' said she. 'It was some little time after dark.'

'What did you do when you got to Mingin?'

'I went to Brendish *thakin's* house.' Again she turned to throw her late employer a meaning look, as though anxious to see what she was going to make of *that*. Mrs. Brendish nodded, showing that she understood and welcomed confirmation of her own theories — which no one else had shown any disposition to accept.

Gower looked from one woman to the other, noted the nod and shrugged to himself a second time. 'What did you go to Brendish *thakin's* house for?' he inquired.

'To get some money the *thakin* owed me for cheroots and other things.'

'What other things?'

She refused to be explicit. 'Different kinds of things,' she murmured comprehensively.

'What time was it you got there?'

'About old folks' bedtime.'

'Did you see Brendish *thakin*?'

'Yes.'

GREEN SANDALS

'Where was he?'

'Upstairs in his room.'

'Was there anyone else about?'

'I saw no one else about, so I went upstairs. He had told me to come – to be paid. I had been up there once or twice before to get the money for things I had bought for him. He was sitting in his chair in a small room.' She spared the bench the grim pantomime she had treated me to in the seclusion of the *ticca gharry*.

'Did he speak to you?'

'The *thakin*? Not a word. He sat very quiet. His eyes were shut. It looked as though he were asleep. I thought at first he had taken some drug or other to make him sleep.'

'What kind of drug?'

'*Ganja* or opium, or something of that kind.'

'Did he ever take those drugs?'

'I think he used to get them from Khattak Shah.'

'What did you do when you saw him – as you thought – asleep?'

'The *thakin* had told me to come and be paid and on the table beside him were some currency notes. I thought they had been put there for me, and so I took them.'

'What happened after that?'

'While I was still with him I heard the sound of a *gharry* below and of people speaking, and presently the *thakinma* came upstairs.'

'Did you stop and see the *thakinma*?'

'No, I went away. I thought the *thakinma* would be angry if she saw me.'

GREEN SANDALS

'Do you think she saw you?'

'I cannot say. I left as quickly as possible.'

'Why did you think she would be angry?'

'I thought she would say I had been giving her husband drugs.'

'Did she know you gave him drugs?'

Ma E lifted her finger-tips a little till they rested against her flattish nose. 'There was one drug she knew I had brought him,' she muttered over them. 'A white drug . . . one he had asked me to get for him.'

'Was it poison?'

'It was a bad drug of some kind. Khattak Shah got it and told me to give it to the *thakin*. He said it was for *batapalaik*.'

'What is *batapalaik*?'

'I don't know.'

Gower turned to me for light, his eyebrows raised. 'Butterflies,' I said, with a flash of inspiration. 'They use cyanide for those collectors' killing-bottles.'

'Ah!' said Gower, and turned to Ma E again. 'How long ago was this?' he asked.

'It was some time in the month of Tazaungmon,' she said.

'Did you give it to the *thakin* yourself – this stuff in Tazaungmon?'

'No, I took it to the house and left it downstairs in the verandah and Mrs. Brendish found it and took it away.'

'Did you see her take it?'

'No, but San Dun told me she had taken it.'

GREEN SANDALS

'Do you know what she did with it?'

'How can I say?' she demanded. 'The *thakinma* knows.' The emphatic glance she shot at him told us that, on her oath, she would be very sorry to have to say what the *thakinma* had done with the white drug.

Gower continued to press her. 'The other drugs the *thakin* got from the bazaar were not poison, were they?' he asked.

She shook her head. 'They were to make people sleep,' said she. 'When I first saw the *thakin* I thought he had taken a drug of that kind. Then I looked again and saw it must have been white stuff like what the *thakinma* took away.'

'What makes you think that?'

'There was a little white stuff left at the bottom of a glass on the table by his side.'

'What happened to the glass?'

'I took it away into the bathroom and washed it. . . . I was frightened, for the stuff was like the stuff I had brought and I was afraid the *thakinma* would say I had given it to the *thakin*.'

Gower stared for awhile at the ceiling. Presently he brought his head down with a jerk. 'Did you ever bring him any more of the white stuff after that first time?' he demanded.

'Never!' She was shrilly confident about this. 'If it was a white drug that caused the *thakin's* death, I think it was the stuff that Mrs. Brendish took away,' she announced.

At this Gower roused himself, just in time to save me intervening. 'Heh!' he cried. 'I don't want to

GREEN SANDALS

know what you think, woman! Tell us only what you yourself did or saw other people do!

She gave her glossy black head a sullen stubborn wag. She gave us everything in three short sentences, leaving the rest to us. 'I brought some white stuff to the house once,' she muttered. 'On the third waning I saw the *thakin* and he was dead. There was some white stuff in the glass by his side.'

Silence followed her words. I looked at Mrs. Brendish. I think we all looked at her – to see what she would make of this impudent challenge. It seemed quite natural that she should rise to her feet. She had followed what had been said in Burmese. 'The poison she's talking about was destroyed,' she announced with spotless sincerity. 'I burnt it. I've said so already.'

That was all she said. She took her seat again and suddenly my head began throbbing as it had throbbed a few hours back in the verandah of my bungalow. Of course she had burnt the stuff. She had told us that long ago, long before Ma E had ventured to defile the court room with her insinuations, and yet, there it was! – the stuff that had been found in Brendish's body was white poison of the kind described! The whole business had all at once become too damnable for words! It wasn't as though I had been shaken a hair's-breadth in my faith. It wasn't (if one cared to look at it in that way) as though Mrs. Brendish would not be entitled to the benefit of the doubt that obviously shrouded the whole terrible affair. In point of fact, I was not thinking of what the immediate verdict would be so

GREEN SANDALS

much as of how, on even the most favourable finding, the known facts would appeal to the outside world. Whatever the court's decision, how could Mingin after this ever be wholly satisfied that that sorely-tried, tragic woman had not in some way been privy to her husband's death? The thing would be whispered against her till her dying day!

I pictured to myself the small talk at the club that evening, even if an open verdict were returned. . . . Wheeler and Mrs. Baird with their heads together . . . a pair of black ear-rings wagging excitedly . . . hands held aloft. . . . Miss Sarkies, with her mouth open, contributing gloating assent. . . . No, whatever happened, there would thereafter for all time be a phantom finger pointing at Mrs. Brendish as the woman who had failed to show that she had not been concerned in the poisoning of her husband. That fate, at any rate, she could not in any circumstances now avoid.

And if, by any chance, there wasn't an open verdict! . . .

CHAPTER XXX

IT was at this stage of affairs, when the issue hung in the balance and all nerves were on the rack, that our minds were snatched abruptly off those two women by an absurd intervention that at a less tragic moment would have been ignored or at most mildly repressed. A voice, delivering itself in husky Hindustani, was raised somewhere in the rear of the court. 'Sahib!' it said, as though the speaker were relying on the informality of the inquiry, 'Ask the woman how much money she took away from the table that night.'

I turned sharply in my chair. By the way everybody was looking at me I judged I was the Sahib who was being addressed. I rose to my feet and peered into the gloom behind me. Among the white *pagris* to the rear I saw a bare black pate wagging vehemently. A brown hand shot up to attract attention.

'Silence there!' I shouted, all on edge, but the voice held on. 'I have got a decree against Brendish Sahib,' it announced stubbornly. 'It is not right that the woman should take away the Sahib's money like that! She should not do that without an order of the court. She is robbing the other creditors.'

I had recognized the black head by this time. 'Hold your tongue, Allagappa!' I thundered. 'This isn't a civil court!'

The constables posted at the door of the court hissed official rebukes of their own at closer range. The brown hand fell, the black head ceased wagging, but the Chetty's tongue was not to be restrained.

GREEN SANDALS

'It is unfair on the other creditors,' he boomed rebelliously. 'I wish to be represented in this case!'

'Another word, and you'll be turned out!' I cried. I swung round and faced the bench again, to see how Gower was taking it. He was rubbing his chin with his pen. I could almost have sworn that he welcomed this diversion. I don't know that in a way I didn't welcome it myself. The whole inquiry was grating unbearably on my nerves and it was a relief to get away for a moment from the main issue, if only to talk about the beggarly currency notes Ma E had taken away from the dead man's elbow.

'We are not going into claims here, Allagappa,' observed Gower with sour composure. 'You'll have to apply to the Civil Judge.' He tapped with his fingers on the table for awhile, then he turned to Ma E again. 'What did you do with the money you took from Mr. Brendish's table?' he asked.

'I gave it to the District Superintendent of Police,' she murmured.

Gower glanced in my direction and I began patting my jacket. If the truth be told, I had in the turmoil of conflicting emotions forgotten all about the delivery of the notes in the *sicca gharry*. 'I've got the money,' I said.

'If the District Superintendent has the money, I am content,' declared Allagappa Chetty magnanimously from his station in the crowd, and some one (it sounded uncommonly like Khattak Shah) gave a hoarse and hostile laugh.

'The cash had better be made over to the bench clerk,' said Gower.

GREEN SANDALS

I felt in my pocket. The wad of paper money was there. I got up, leant forward and placed it on Gower's table. 'I haven't counted it yet,' said I, a little disconcerted by my lapse of memory.

Gower took the notes out of the paper in which they were wrapped and then and there began counting them with slow exasperating thumbiness, licking his fingers from time to time, going back more than once to verify his reckoning. 'Three hundred rupees,' he observed at last in English, and repeated the total in Burmese, glancing for confirmation towards Ma E, who merely looked, blinking, down her fingers and would not say yes or no.

But if Ma E would say nothing, there was some one there who would. 'Three hundred rupees! Who would pay three hundred rupees for cheroots?' demanded Allagappa, hovering, irrepressible, in the background, and again the constables, scandalized, hissed like soda-water syphons, calling him to order.

Gower looked up at the roof, raised his voice. 'If you say anything more, Allagappa, I'll commit you for contempt!' he exclaimed. He handed the notes to the bench clerk who took them over and stood there with his hand out, as though waiting for something more to come.

There *was* something more to come. On the table in front of Gower lay something white. It was the paper in which the notes had been wrapped. Gower gazed at the crumpled half sheet, picked it up, turned it this way and that. Something on it had caught his eye. He held it to the light. Wrinkles of incredulity crept up on to his forehead.

GREEN SANDALS

He held the paper up to Ma E. 'Heh! Where did you get this?' he inquired.

Ma E peered rather vacantly. 'It was lying beside the notes when I saw the *thakin* sitting in the chair,' she replied. 'I picked it up and wrapped the money in it — like this.' Before the eyes of us, watching, her fingers went through the deft motions of rolling a cheroot. 'I did not want to dirty the notes,' she explained.

'Did you read what was written on the paper?' asked Gower.

'I' she protested. 'I cannot read or write!' She seemed to think the question a rather foolish one.

Gower turned abruptly from her to another perusal of the paper. There was writing of some kind on it. I watched him, fascinated, as he read, for the gleam that lit up his face as his eyes travelled spoke of things on that unconsidered wrapper that might be worth all and more than all the money it had held. At last he rose, tiptoed, round-shouldered, down from the bench, came to where Mrs. Brendish sat beside me and handed her the sheet.

'This, I think, concerns you, Mrs. Brendish,' he said. 'Will you read it, please?'

She, in her turn, had risen from her chair to face him. She took the creased white thing from his hands and ran her eye over it, standing in the sight of us all, her lips half shaping the written words and whitening as they moved. She went at least twice through the writing, then with unsteady fingers she folded the paper across and across again and sat

GREEN SANDALS

down, with her head bowed over it, as over some sacred relic.

And so she remained for what seemed to me an extraordinarily long time, while Gower, who had regained his seat on the bench, sat, with his hands on the table, and passed one thumb over the other and waited, with his eye on her, giving her time to recover. My heart burned within me to see her sitting thus gaped at by a curious crowd. If I had had my way, I should have turned every native in the court out neck and crop, then and there. I was within an ace of starting on my own account when Gower suddenly lifted up his voice. 'I have one or two questions to ask you, Mrs. Brendish,' he said.

'Yes,' she whispered, but without raising her head.

'Is that your husband's writing?' he asked.

She drooped her face an inch or two lower to indicate assent.

'Are you satisfied that he wrote it?'

Her face lifted quickly for a moment. One could see she hated to hear the note of satisfaction Gower could not keep out of his voice. 'Who else could have?' she demanded bitterly, and drooped again.

'Thank you,' said Gower as though he meant it. 'You mustn't mind, Mrs. Brendish, but I must ask you to hand that paper over to Mr. Venne. Only for a moment. He'll give it back to you directly. We want something for the record, you see.'

'The record?' she repeated in a dazed sort of way.

I rose and held out my hand close to her face. At first she clutched the white scrap tighter to her, as

GREEN SANDALS

though determined not to part with it, not even for the moment Gower had named. Then she raised her head and her eyes encountered mine and she handed me the paper with the obedience of a child. I like now to fancy that she would have refused to relinquish the precious sheet to anyone present in court but myself.

'Will you read that, please,' said Gower to me.

'Out loud?' I asked.

'Heavens, no! To yourself,' he said.

I cast my eyes over the pencil marks that sprawled across the paper – as jerky and uncouth as the writer himself – . Only three living persons – Mrs. Brendish, Gower and myself – have ever read the original. This was how it ran:

Dearest Honor, You meant it for the best, I know, but I had to take some of the stuff before you did away with it. . . . It was what I got it for. . . . Opium wouldn't do. . . . Nothing else. . . . Not enough. . . . Forgive me. . . . It had to come. . . . Things are crowding round. . . . No other way. . . . O. B.

I finished. I looked up towards Gower.

'Will you make a copy – now – immediately,' said he, rubbing his hands sharply together.

The bench clerk handed me a pen and I made a rapid transcript – not much more legible than poor Brendish's own scrawl. I scribbled 'True copy' in the corner and signed my name below. I passed the copy over to the bench clerk, a fussy Burman jack-in-office who had been fidgeting around, scenting

GREEN SANDALS

all kinds of irregularity in procedure. The original, at a motion from Gower, I handed back to Mrs. Brendish. She took it, hardly seeming to be aware that it had come into her possession again. She was on her feet. 'May I go now?' her white lips asked the magistrate.

'I don't think we need detain you longer,' he said, clearing his throat, and the crowd of natives round the door gave way before her passage. We all rose solemnly, as to a departing queen, and watched her take herself and her woes into the verandah outside. No one had the assurance to accompany her down the verandah or see her into the *gharry* which waited for her below.

There was a restrained shuffling and a puzzled whispering for a space after she had quitted the court. No one but Gower and I knew what had happened. It was obvious that some explanation was due to the European public, at any rate. At a signal from Gower my copy of Brendish's farewell message to his wife was handed to Priestley to read. He glanced through it, nodded understandingly and passed it on to Staynes without a word. Staynes stared at it for awhile in silence, finding in it matter for a good deal of inelegant gaping, put it into the bench clerk's hands and left the court.

Gower, standing by his table, began throwing his papers together as a sign that the inquiry was over. The natives in the court, still in the dark as to developments, gazed with slow Oriental gravity at one another and began to drift away in twos and threes. As they left I could hear Allagappa Chetty,

GREEN SANDALS

the undefeated, still holding forth *sotto voce* on the rights of creditors.

I turned to the police constable behind me. I indicated Ma E. 'She can go,' I said to him, and our young woman lost no time in tightening her waistcloth and scurrying out of the danger zone. Once at large, she did not stop to inquire how it was that the case had petered out so unexpectedly. I wondered when she would learn and what her feelings would be when she did learn – that for days on end she had been carrying intact about on her person the one thing on earth that could baulk her of a positively unique opportunity of paying off old scores!

I was still standing by the advocates' table when Gower came down off the bench. He halted for a moment above me, peered over the rail into my face. Save for us two the court-room was empty. 'A damned near thing, Venne, my boy!' he observed, with his eyes narrowed impressively, and rubbing gently with inky fingers at the back of an untidy head, he disappeared into his office.

I nodded a sympathetic assent. It had been a very near thing – for him, as for everybody else. In fact, as I put my *topi* on to go, the conclusion I came to was that no one present in court that afternoon had greater cause to bless the discovery of Brendish's last message than Gower himself. I ask you to conceive his feelings if, as a consequence of his investigations, he had been compelled to commit Mrs. Brendish to the Sessions on a charge of murder!

CHAPTER XXXI

IF poor old putty-faced Brendish had been dowered with the faintest sense of humour, I declare I could have pictured him grinning at the way we took the posthumous surprises he sprang upon us. In spite of wolfram and usurers and everything he did not die insolvent. He was involved, but by no means irremediably. Quite unlooked-for credits came to light when his estate was being handled by the District Judge. He had big debts, it is true, but his assets, when realized, were just a trifle bigger. Allagappa got his decree in full, with interest on an iniquitous scale, and ceased haunting the courts for the time being. Ma E, who had had the assurance to file a claim for moneys due, actually established it to the extent of about a fifth of the sum of which I had relieved her in the *ticca gharry*, and promptly quitted Mingin with her takings, under the wing of a handsome young Arakanese hospital compounder, leaving Khattak Shah to compare distressed notes with San Dun on the fickleness of womankind. In the end, when house and furniture had been sold and all liabilities had been met, Mrs. Brendish was left with a small sum in hand to add to the slender pittance she had inherited from her father, old Tom Ryder. It was not much, but it sufficed to keep her head above water while she made her plans for the future.

In one way this rehabilitation of the supposed bankrupt was satisfactory; in another it was very much the reverse. Gower's formal finding at the

GREEN SANDALS

inquest (suicide while of unsound mind) ought to have finally hushed the tongue of scandal, but I was soon to learn that it had only caused it to wag to a vile new tune. About a fortnight after the inquest I found myself alongside the club tennis court close to a man named Porch, a soft, sallow, beetle-browed fellow in one of the timber firms. He sidled up to me in his black ill-fitting alpaca jacket, with his hands behind his back, breathing heavily.

'Have you heard the latest?' he asked.

'No,' I said. 'I never do.'

'They're shifting Staynes to Rangoon,' said he, as though announcing something epoch-making.

'I don't mind if they are,' I observed. 'I shan't cry my eyes out.'

We are parochially minded in Mingin. We study the *Gazette* postings religiously and the movements of our fellow birds of passage are more important to many of us than Reuter's telegrams. There was, however, more than ordinary interest in Staynes' transfer gleaming in Porch's heavy-lidded eyes. He shifted a pace or two closer to show that as yet he had barely touched the fringe of the matter.

'No more will I,' he declared. 'But there's some one who will – or ought to, anyway.' He thrust his head forward and leered at me sideways with his mouth a little askew. 'What's she going to do now?' he demanded out of a corner of it.

'Now? . . . She? . . . Who?' I asked him.

He ignored my queries. He knew I understood him well enough. 'I mean, unless he has actually come up to the scratch already,' he said.

GREEN SANDALS

'Are you talking about Staynes?' I asked dryly.

'Well, she can't stop on at a loose end like this for ever, can she?' he went on. 'And, after all, though there's fifteen years between them, it's the least the young blighter can do, eh? He can't do less. . . . After a respectable interval, I mean, of course. . . . No one wants to rush him. . . . It wouldn't be decent.'

The champion of the decencies paused to give me another side glance. 'You don't believe he has come up to the scratch, then, eh?' he asked. 'Do you think by any chance he's trying to get out of it?'

He put the alternative to me alluringly, lifting his upper lip to show the rims of a row of yellowish teeth. 'How are we to know he mayn't have been working for this transfer himself so as to have some excuse for dropping her?' he inquired. 'What do you think of that for a low-down trick?'

I scowled at Porch. 'Why the deuce shouldn't they move Staynes?' I demanded. 'What has Mrs. Brendish got to do with him?'

He took me almost pityingly by the elbow. 'Venne,' he informed me, 'you haven't been keeping your eyes open. You're a new-comer and so busy with your violent crime reports that you don't notice things. Weren't you dining at the Bairds' when the couple of them drove off together from the house in her *gharry* – with old Brendish (mind you!) stiff and cold on his bed at the time? That's what sickens everybody. Flagrant, I call it!'

'Don't be an ass, Porch!' I cried. 'Have you never seen a man given a lift home after dinner?'

GREEN SANDALS

'Ah, but that was only the last straw,' he protested. 'There was plenty before that. It may have been before you came to Mingin. Don't tell me, though, you have never heard of the way he has always haunted the house!'

'He used to go to play chess with Brendish,' I exclaimed. 'I may tell you you're talking damned nonsense the whole time!'

'Not a bit of it! Not a bit of it!' he returned, and would have taken my arm again if I had let him. 'My dear chap, believe me, poor old Brendish didn't take that poison stuff an hour too soon. There would have been a fine bust up if he had lived another fortnight. Nasty, I tell you! Poor beggar! Why, after the way she treated him, he should have gone out of the way to clear out and make it easy for her passes my comprehension.'

'Make it easy for her!' I cried furiously. 'My good sir, you know well enough he left behind a most affectionate message for her! Upon my soul, you talk as though she had driven him to it by her behaviour.'

'Well, and if she did,' declared Porch unrepentantly, 'it just shows there's jolly well only one thing left for Staynes to do now!'

I will not repeat what I told Porch on this occasion about himself, but I know I might have said a good deal more and yet failed to persuade him that he really *was* a measly hound, for he merely spoke the common speech of the station. I ought myself to have guessed before this that, balked of their murder thrill and faced with a clear case of suicide, the

GREEN SANDALS

local gossips were bound to have cast about for some sensational motive for self-destruction and, finding none sufficient for their ends in Brendish's money affairs, had chosen to discover one in his domestic relations. The upshot of it all seemed to be that if everybody believed Brendish had been driven to his last extremity by his wife's carrying on with Staynes, Mrs. Brendish had not gained much after all by the discovery of her husband's last message.

And what, I asked myself distractedly, was this talk of Staynes 'coming up to the scratch'? – this hinting at the 'least he could do'? It was all mightily disturbing!

The rumour of Staynes' transfer was denied. It was stated later that the orders for the move to Rangoon had come and that Staynes had pleaded to be allowed to remain. He was certainly still in Mingin when March and the hot weather came in. He was said to have renewed his visits to Mrs. Brendish, but this I took upon me to doubt, for, in point of fact, Mrs. Brendish saw no one and lived a hermit's life. The house had been sold – to old Moggridge, I think – but she had been allowed to remain in occupation. There had been an auction sale of property on the premises at which I had become the purchaser of several lots, and it was through one of these that I finally got into touch with her again. A note from her was brought one afternoon to my office.

'Dear Mr. Venne (she said in it), How about the piano you bought at the auction? Shall I send it to you or will you arrange to take it away?'

GREEN SANDALS

As it happened I had purchased the piano with no intention whatever of taking it away. Personally, I have no more use for a piano than I have for a rabbit-hutch, but I was determined not only that Mrs. Brendish should not be robbed of the only solace left her, but also that it should be to me and to no one else that she was indebted for the rescue.

Curiously enough, she was playing on the piano itself when I went over to her bungalow in the evening to answer her message verbally. I could hear the notes of it throbbing on the warm air like far-off caravan bells booming across a mountain gorge on the northern frontier. I turned in at the front gate and waited on the edge of the drive near a great clump of bamboos, feeling that I ought to get to appreciate music more than I did. The sun was settling down into a bank of hot haze in the west and the merciful shadows were lengthening. The crows were making fussy preparations for roosting overhead and a flock of green parrots was fluttering into and out of the uppermost branches of a banyan tree beyond the cook-house. The gold mohur tree out by the back gate was in full flower – a feathery mass of green and orange – and in the distance I could see a hoopoe ranging over the baked earth, with its crest erect and its curved bill busy. There were no servants about. Mrs. Brendish and I and the birds had the sunset and the music all to ourselves. You can see I was a bit sentimental.

Presently she finished playing and I saw her come, panting for a breath of fresh air, to the edge of the verandah. With the sunset in her eyes she

GREEN SANDALS

did not notice me till I quitted my shelter and stepped towards the house. Then she moved back out of sight and I had an uncomfortable sense of intrusion until I suddenly heard her voice calling to me to come in. By the time I was close she was standing, looking very tall, at the top of the steps leading up into the lower verandah and I noticed she had not sold all her maidenhair ferns yet, for there was a green bank of foliage behind her as she faced me, with the glow of the evening on her face.

'Did you get my note about the piano?' she asked.

'That's what I've come about,' said I.

'Come and have a look at your property,' she said.

'Don't call it my property!' I returned, and yet, when I had been led up to the thing, I was glad I could call it my property, for, placed there, four-square, quite at home, with the music piled on it, it seemed, in a way of speaking, to make me, its owner, free of the house.

She wiped the keys affectionately with her handkerchief. 'How are we to get it over to your place?' she asked. 'I suppose a bullock-cart will manage it all right.'

'You're not to think of sending it over!' I said. 'I want you to house it. You don't imagine I'm thirsting to play on it, do you?'

'You!' she returned, smiling kindly. 'No, I can't see you sitting down to perform on it!' Then she cried out, to show me she had by this time seen

GREEN SANDALS

through my little game. 'It was very wrong of you, Mr. Venne! I can't think what you did it for!'

'I can't think what Staynes can have done it for!' I growled.

'Come, come! He does like music, anyway!' she returned. 'You don't say *he* bid for it too!'

'He did,' I informed her. 'We ran each other up finely, I can tell you! We were at it, hammer and tongs!'

'Were you, now!' she exclaimed. It may have really only been the sunset, but the mental picture of Staynes and me at it together, hammer and tongs, with old Minus, the auctioneer, looking from one of us to the other, seemed to bring a flush of colour into her pale cheeks. 'And you outbid him?' she murmured.

'Yes, I outbid him,' I declared vaingloriously, and we stood for awhile silent while she fingered the keys – more tenderly than ever, without quite making them sound. When she looked up from her hands again it was to cry out softly, 'Poor Mr. Staynes!'

I felt something clutching low down at my throat. My smug complacency left me and I found myself speaking in a voice that was hoarse and strained. 'Have you seen him lately?' I demanded, as though it were my business.

She looked at me shrinkingly. 'No! No! No!' she assured me, and then she added, with her eyes almost shut and her white hands clenched, 'No, I couldn't have borne it! He has written . . . two or three times, but I couldn't –'

GREEN SANDALS

For a moment the sight of the pain at the corner of her eyelids made me see red. 'Don't call him "poor Mr. Staynes," the young blighter!' I exclaimed. Then, confounded by the absurdity of my attitude, I made the whole thing unpardonably worse by blurting out – I suppose with a vague idea of comforting her – 'Not that your husband was worried about *that*, I'm certain.'

To this she said nothing, and, to hide my discomfiture (for, once I had spoken, I did not need to be told how hopelessly I had put my foot into it), I turned half from her and, moving to the edge of the verandah, leant on the rail and stared out into the compound, where the crows were noisier than ever. Presently I peered round to see how she was taking that tactless outburst of mine and at the sight of her I had a pang of dismay, for, standing there, with her elbows on the piano, she had put down her face on her hands – just as I had put mine on the last occasion when we had been alone together. She remained in this posture of misery so long – taking no notice of me – that at last I accepted it as a signal of dismissal and should have picked up my *topi* and sneaked dejectedly out of the verandah if she had not all at once raised her head and turned her eyes upon me.

'Did I behave very badly with him?' she asked in a low voice, and I could see the remains of tears at the corners of her lids, and when I stood dumb before her, not knowing what to say, she burst out with 'Tell me, what do people think of it? What have they been saying?'

GREEN SANDALS

It was a terrible question to have to answer and yet, though I can't say why, I was glad to know she was anxious to have it out with me on that matter of Staynes. I reached for my hat and turned it in my hands. 'You ought to know Mingin by this time,' I cried, feeling that I couldn't possibly lie to her. 'They will have their futile little say about everything and everybody and the less they know the more they'll chatter.'

'Of course they will!' she assented mournfully. 'And the worst of it is that I *did* behave disgracefully with him.'

'Oh, nonsense!' I protested. 'Good Heavens, some of these people imagine that a woman can't drive a man home after dinner without . . .'

'Ah, but you don't know!' she cried.

'I do! I do!' I assured her, and something Porch had said made me add, 'I've had my eyes open.'

'You think you do, but you don't,' she returned. 'You know no more than the others do.' She gave her head a shake and then, to my consternation, she added, 'But I want you to know more. I want you to know everything!'

She must have seen my jaw drop. I felt just as though she expected me to drag out a blue police note-book and begin taking her statement down. 'I know as much as I want to know,' I cried out. 'If you think that just because I've had to investigate the case -'

She almost laughed out loud at my denseness. 'Oh, this isn't a police matter,' she declared. 'All

GREEN SANDALS

the same, I want you to know everything. I owe it to you.'

'To me!' I cried.

'Yes, to you,' she replied. 'Not because you're District Superintendent – God forbid! but because you've been so good to me – helped me such a lot. Listen. There was a time, once, just before the end, when I was angry with Oswald . . . "Mad," I called it. Do you remember my speaking about it before?'

'Of course I do,' I said. 'Though there's no need to drag it up again. It was quite natural that you should be mad with him. You didn't like his dealings with Ma E. You didn't understand. But we've finished with all that. Why think of it now?'

'Because you've been so good to me,' was a second time her extraordinary reply. Her voice dropped suddenly. 'You don't know how I wanted to score off him,' she whispered. 'It got on my nerves. I thought all kinds of things about Oswald – not only in connection with Ma E. . . . Other things. . . . He had been very strange, you know. I understand what it was now, but I didn't then. I thought he wanted to get rid of me, or at any rate, go off and leave me.'

'What! away from Mingin?' I demanded.

'Yes, right away,' said she. 'In a sailing ship. Wasn't it absurd? . . . "A journey to go," he called it. . . . *Now* I know what kind of journey he meant. . . . What a fool I was! . . . But at the time, oh, it was just agony. . . . I wanted to get level with him. . . . I wanted to pay him out. . . . And then that

GREEN SANDALS

night, when I came home from the Bairds', thinking I should find him gone, I yearned for some human soul to be with me and help me bear it, and there the boy, Staynes, was . . . I encouraged him . . . I made him stop with me. . . . And all the time Oswald was lying dead upstairs and neither of us knew it!

'Well,' I called out consolingly, 'I shouldn't worry about that now. How were you to know he was dead?'

'Ah, but I led the boy on,' she murmured, forcing her confidences on me in the strangest way. 'I felt so revengeful! And then I went upstairs, and there was Oswald, in the chair . . . like that! And I knew I had been wrong . . . all wrong . . . or very nearly all wrong, for, after all, Ma E *had* been up to him, hadn't she?'

'Well, anyhow, he never knew what you suspected,' I observed. I cast about for words of comfort for her. 'Otherwise he would never have written that letter he did to you,' I went on.

She clutched gratefully at this. 'You think so, don't you?' she exclaimed. 'You've read it, of course. You didn't see any reproach in it, did you? It must have been his business worries that drove him to it!'

'Nothing else, I'll swear,' I assured her.

'Things are crowding round,' she murmured. 'That's what he said in it, do you remember? It was that Chetty!'

'Of course,' I agreed. 'Debts and things . . . that and the climate. Don't imagine, for Heaven's

GREEN SANDALS

sake, that it was anything *you* had done that got on his nerves – whatever people may say.'

'Ah, they do say it then?' she cried out piteously. 'Well, I deserve it. I've brought it on myself!' Her head went down.

I had a mental picture of the busybodies of the station discussing her affairs. The very idea made me furious. I threw out my chest. 'I'm going to show them they're wrong, though!' I called out truculently.

'You!' she cried, raising her eyebrows.

'Yes, I'm the one to do it,' I replied. 'You see, I know everything by this time.' And then, lest she should ask me point-blank how I was going to do it, I changed the conversation. 'Let's get away from all that, though,' I said. 'Tell me what your plans are. Are you going to stop on here for the present?'

'Only till the lease is up,' said she. 'After that . . . well, it's all in the air . . . I hardly know what's going to happen then. I shall probably be going to England.'

'You can't stand Mingin?' I asked.

'Nothing would persuade me to stop out!' she said – it seemed to me rather defiantly.

'I shall be going home myself before the end of the year,' I hastened to observe.

This seemed to be news to her. 'You're retiring from the service, are you?' she asked.

'Yes,' said I. 'I've earned my pension and I'm going.'

She had started fingering the keys of the piano –

GREEN SANDALS

my piano – again. ‘We may meet at home then,’ she suggested, with her head a little on one side.

‘I hope so,’ I assured her. ‘Meanwhile,’ I went on, looking steadily at her, ‘there’s no reason why we shouldn’t occasionally meet, even in this wicked hole. I haven’t seen you for nearly a month.’

‘I can’t look anyone in the face,’ she confessed, belying her words with a glance of great steadfastness.

‘You might look me in the face occasionally, anyway!’ I said. ‘I don’t mind a flick about the others. Now, don’t you worry about what people are saying or thinking. I’m going to put that all right for you!’ I can do it!’ I held out my hand. ‘Good-bye for the present,’ I cried. ‘And when I want that piano I’ll send round for it.’

I expect it was my confounded assurance that she was smiling at as we parted, for she certainly was smiling as I went down the verandah steps, treading on air. I may have sounded boastful and yet what I had said about being able to put things right for her happened to be Gospel truth. The more I thought about this strange talk of ours, the more I was convinced that I was the man for that particular mission. It was clear that Mingin believed Brendish to have put an end to himself on account of his wife’s relations with Staynes. It was equally clear that it would continue to believe so unless some solid knowledgeable person, posted in all the facts, came forward and in some downright conspicuous way showed that this theory was obviously rubbish. Now, as it happened, no one was better posted in the facts

GREEN SANDALS

than myself, who had had my finger in the pie from beginning to end. I don't think anyone would call me flighty or unduly impressionable. In any case I was quite ready publicly to give the lie to the gossip-mongers of the station. There were various ways, of course, of showing them how completely they were off the mark, but there was one, I must admit, that appealed to me above all others.

CHAPTER XXXII

FROM that moment I conceived it my duty to get hold of Staynes once more and tell him a few home truths. I failed to find him at the club, but two days after my talk with Mrs. Brendish he walked calmly up into my verandah in his riding kit, like a fly into a spider's web. He came ostensibly about some police matter in which one of his servants was concerned, but it was not long before he showed that the real object of his visit was, if you please, to ask me a favour.

'Look here, Venne,' he exclaimed when the ground had been cleared. 'You did me fairly down at the auction the other day.'

'I hope I did,' I returned, not over affably. I was amazed that he had the face to talk about the auction.

'About that piano now,' he went on, as though he and I were bosom friends. 'I'll give you twenty rupees more than you paid for it if you will let me have it.'

I looked him up and down. I scented a sister scheme to my own. 'Nothing doing,' I replied, without asking him to sit down.

'Well then, fifty,' he said.

I was in two minds about taking the youth by the back of the neck and thrusting him down the steps. I think I should have done so if it hadn't been that there was something almost intriguing about his effrontery. I was suddenly reminded of that look of impudent collusion he had treated me to at the close of our last strange interview the morning after

GREEN SANDALS

Brendish's death. One could have imagined that we had then entered into a secret compact to shield Mrs. Brendish from the results of her actions.

'I tell you there's nothing doing,' I growled.

He was not to be shaken off. 'I'll make it a hundred!' he cried magnificently. 'You can't possibly use the thing yourself.'

I felt I had the upper hand of him and could afford to be sarcastic. 'How the deuce do you know I'm not going to learn the piano?' I inquired.

'Oh, rot!' he cried. 'Look here, it's a wretched old instrument, but Mrs. Brendish is attached to it.'

'Which,' I observed, 'is precisely the reason why the day before yesterday I asked her to look after it for me. What the devil do you think I bought it for? — honestly, now.'

He went off on a side issue. 'You saw her the day before yesterday!' he exclaimed. 'She has begun seeing people, then!'

'She saw me, anyway,' I returned.

'I've been wanting to see her myself for a long time,' he declared. 'But every time I've been there —'

The fire suddenly kindled within me and I found words to speak. 'Look here, young man!' I cried. 'The less you see of Mrs. Brendish the better!'

In a second he caught my flame. 'Why ever not?' he demanded with a scarlet spot in each of his white cheeks.

'You ought to know why!' I replied. 'You ought to have kept clear of her before. I suppose you — no, I don't suppose you *do* know, but let me tell you that

GREEN SANDALS

there are people in Mingin who say that Brendish would never have committed suicide if it hadn't been for you!

To this he replied, quite amazingly, 'Well, well, well! He treated her very badly'; and then, as I stood speechless, staring at him open-mouthed, he went on: 'Well, if it's as they seem to think, that's all the more reason why I should be allowed to see her now!'

His retort was so unexpected – so barefaced – that I seemed to go through all the physical reactions to a hard blow in the chest. When I found enough breath to put him in his proper place I exclaimed, 'Please don't imagine that I think anything of the kind myself. It was Allagappa Chetty's business that really did for Brendish. You needn't flatter yourself, young man, that Brendish gave *you* a thought when he –'

He was furious. 'When he did what?' he demanded.

'You know well enough,' I returned. 'When he took that dose of cyanide. Do you imagine for a moment that if he had been worrying about your relations with Mrs. Brendish he would have been able to write as he did to her?'

Staynes had given me surprises enough, in all conscience, already, but now he was to give me a bigger one than ever. 'Look here, Venne, don't you try and bully me!' he cried. 'You're in it as deep as anyone. Are you prepared to swear that that was a genuine letter from Brendish that you produced at the inquest?'

GREEN SANDALS

'What! the paper round those notes?' I demanded. 'Do you mean to insinuate that it wasn't genuine?'

'If it was, why wasn't the original kept?' he argued, narrowing his eyes again, with a crafty side glance. 'Why was no one allowed to look at it? Why were you in such a precious hurry to copy it before anyone else knew what it was all about?'

I was too taken aback to be really angry. This new idea presented to me was preposterous enough to be almost comic. 'You think it was faked, then?' I cried. 'You'll be saying next, I suppose, that Brendish didn't really commit suicide! You mean to suggest, then, that Mrs. Brendish - '

'I'm suggesting nothing whatever against Mrs. Brendish!' he declared quickly. 'The whole thing may have been an accident . . . the stuff may have been given him by mistake . . . we don't know . . .'

His voice died away in his throat and he put up his hand as though to clutch at and hold what was left of it there. He was watching the gathering fury in my face with eyes that stared ludicrously. 'Vennel!' he muttered with his remnant of an utterance. 'Can you swear that that paper was not a fake?'

'Who the deuce can have faked it?' I asked explosively. 'How can it be a forgery? I know Brendish's handwriting; so does Mrs. Brendish; so does Gower. Do you mean to insinuate that we're all three in it?'

'Heaven forbid!' he ejaculated.

'Well, leave the other two out,' I went on. 'Per-

GREEN SANDALS

haps you'll be saying next that I forged Brendish's handwriting myself!

For once he looked me straight in the face. 'I shouldn't have blamed you if you had!' he asserted, and then he made one last extraordinary confession, nodding significantly. 'I should have been ready to fake it myself, if need be,' he said.

He continued nodding after he had finished speaking, and now at last I began to wonder whether I hadn't found a cause for the odd confederate manner in which he had been regarding me ever since, at our first interview, he had gathered that I didn't wish to be unduly hard upon Mrs. Brendish. As I looked at him, however, I could see that, whatever he may have thought in the past about me, he was now at least satisfied that Brendish's last message to his wife was authentic and, what was more, that he was beginning to review the whole situation — quite possibly for the very first time — in the light of that acknowledged certainty.

It was to his own position that, when, after a longish silence, he spoke again, he referred. 'I've been wondering why the beggars have been looking at me like that ever since!' he declared musingly. 'Of course if they thought Brendish did it because Mrs. Brendish and I —'

I caught him up quickly. 'That is precisely what they have been thinking,' I said, 'and that's precisely why decency requires that you should have no further dealings with her.'

He stood there, sweating and twitching. Irresolution mastered him completely. 'But I can't leave

GREEN SANDALS

it at that!' he cried, pulling at his fingers. 'I ought to make amends. Venne, I know you want to do the best you can for Mrs. Brendish. I shouldn't be talking like this if I didn't. Look here, I want to do the right thing!'

'What do you call the right thing?' I demanded.

'Oh, damn it, you know well enough what the right thing is!' he groaned. 'It seems to me about the only thing a gentleman can do after what has happened. I don't want to be an utter skunk!'

'If you don't want to be an utter skunk,' I observed, 'the proper thing for you to do is never to speak to Mrs. Brendish again. Can't you get out of Mingin? Didn't I hear you were transferred to Rangoon?'

'Blackburns' have been talking about it,' he murmured. 'I asked to be allowed to stop on, though Heaven knows, I had rather — No, I don't want people to think I'm bolting from my responsibilities. I'm ready to face the music, if need be.' He tried to throw his chest out.

'There'll be no music!' I growled, and added, as a kind of afterthought, 'At any rate, there'll be none for *you*!'

'It seems a mean thing to do!' he wailed. 'She's hard up. She has no one to look after her.'

'She has lots of people to look after her!' I declared aggressively.

'If only I was sure of that!' he brought out with great fervour, and then he looked me up and down with an appraising glance, taking me all in, regarding me, so far as I could judge, in an entirely new

GREEN SANDALS

and surprising light. The result of this survey was to make him call out finally, 'She's a very fine character, Vennel'

'I don't need to be told it,' I returned.

'Is she going to England?' he inquired next, as though I were bound to know what her movements were.

'Probably before the end of the year,' said I. I had a kind of presentiment that the next thing he was going to ask me was whether I too was going to England before the end of the year, and, as I did not intend telling him, I began to move about and make it quite clear that I had had enough of his company. 'I must go and have a bath directly,' I observed. 'I've got to be in office early this morning.'

He took the hint and made for the stairs, though I know he would have been glad to get more out of me before he left. At the head of the steps he threw me one final glance. 'Mind you,' he observed with just a touch of defiance, 'if I were ten years older —'

I would not let him finish his sentence. 'If you were ten years older, you wouldn't be thinking the silly things you're thinking now!' I cried out sharply, and, pulling back the *purdah*, I went off in to my bedroom.

CHAPTER XXXIII

I SAW Staynes only once again after this, the occasion being when he left Mingin for good and all on transfer to Rangoon. I had had orders to go and see him and say good-bye to him on the steamer, but had been delayed and arrived only just in time to fulfil my duty. The boat had got her steam up and was braying with peremptory finality when I set foot on the gangway. The non-passengers were streaming in the opposite direction to myself on to the wharf. Wheeler and Blake were among them, having just finished their farewells. By the time I reached Staynes's side the saloon deck was almost deserted. Staynes was the only European passenger on board. He was standing alone, well forward, with his elbows on the deck rail, staring disconsolately out towards the line of hills that shimmered in the morning air behind the civil station. He did not notice my approach till I was close up to him. Then he turned and his eyes encountered mine.

'I've come to say good-bye, Staynes,' I said, and had shaken hands with him before he had had time to utter a word or make any gesture of avoidance. 'I haven't much time,' I went on. 'The boat's just off, I see. I've got a message for you, though, from Mrs. Brendish.'

He stood there, dangling the hand I had just let go of in the oddest fashion. He looked as if he thought I had come to reproach him. 'I've done what you told me to do,' he faltered, drawing inch by

GREEN SANDALS

inch away from me. 'I haven't seen her once since you spoke to me that time. I haven't even written to say good-bye to her. I don't know what she'll think of it! A message, you say. What is it?'

'Oh, it's only that she wanted me to say good-bye to you,' I explained quickly. 'She hopes you'll get on famously in Rangoon. She wishes you every success.'

At this his face lighted. 'Famously, did she say?' he exclaimed. 'Please thank her awfully from me. Perhaps I ought to send her a line from Rangoon.'

'Unnecessary,' I assured him.

'I hope she doesn't bear me a grudge,' he murmured.

I laughed out loud. 'Not a little bit!' I assured him. 'Ah, and one thing more,' I added. 'She asked me to thank you very much for trying to get hold of that piano for her.'

He slid his hands backwards and forwards over the deck rail in front of him. 'It was the least I could do,' he muttered, looking down. 'As you know yourself, I should have done a great deal more, if you hadn't -'

'That's true!' I cried, catching him up. 'Of course I did. I simply had to.' I turned my eyes from him to where, from the farther end of the deck, Cameron, the skipper, was signalling to me that time was more than up. I waved back to the old man and then, facing Staynes again, held out my hand quickly. 'Yes, I simply had to,' I declared. 'You see, I've wanted to ever since -'

'You'll have to run like the devil!' he exclaimed,

GREEN SANDALS

watching Cameron's agitated beckonings. 'Ever since when?'

'Ever since I saw her first,' I said. 'And that's eighteen years ago.'

Our hands met. He looked at me as much as to say that he had seen through my designs from the very beginning. 'Well,' he informed me, 'I wish you joy, both of you.'

I turned and went at a sharp double down the deck. They had by this time hauled the gangway in and I had to do an eight-foot jump to reach the wharf. It looked more like eighteen when I took it!

I drove straight off from the landing-stage to Honoria and told her how I had fared. Unfortunately I began at the wrong end. 'I'm very glad I didn't see you jump that last bit!' she declared. 'I should have been in a fearful state. You really must take care of yourself and not do foolish things like that!' She was so exercised about the way in which I had quitted the steamer that she almost forgot to ask about Staynes. 'What did he say?' she inquired at last, when she had finished lecturing me on my foolhardiness.

'He hoped you didn't bear him a grudge,' I replied.

'A grudge! The idea!' she cried. 'What else did he say?'

'He wished us joy - both of us,' I went on.

'Ah, you told him, then, did you?' she exclaimed.

'Well, he jolly well guessed,' I observed.

GREEN SANDALS

'Do you think the others have guessed by this time?' she asked.

'I rather expect they have,' said I. 'However, to make sure, we'll tell them all, shall we? How about this evening – at the club?'

is

to
ut

GREEN

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



3 9015 03075 2474



**DO NOT REMOVE
OR
MUTATE**



Digitized by Google

